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May 26, 1896.

No. 983.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXVIII.



BANTY BILLY'S BONANZA

"BANTY, YER GOT YERSELF IN A BOX. RECKON THEM REAR GUARD 'D PINCH
A FELLER HARD EF THEY CAUGHT HIM A-TRAILIN'!"

OR, THE

Bear-Tamer's Disguise

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"YOU COME TOO LATE."

"HOLY Cæsars! Shell I, er shan't I? Et's
not offen my mother's darlin' holds ther edge,
but this time I reckon I better not chip."

The one who muttered these words to him-
self, as he crouched behind the bushes which

he had partially drawn aside with one hand, was a boy of moderate size and none too well clad, but with a shrewd face and an eye that was keen.

In his right hand he grasped a Winchester, his thumb on the hammer, and it was plain he was contemplating a shot at something he saw in the distance.

He lowered the muzzle of the gun, however, and continued to stare downward, while his lips moved.

"Jest ez like ter hit ther pidgin', an' miss ther hawk. An' thar's no chance ter git nearder inside ov half an hour. Reckon I jest got ter lay low an' wait ter flip my keards. Ett's a brace game ov some kind they's playin', an' I'll git a chance ter run up ag'in it yet."

Banty Billy Bruce knew nothing about the rights of the affair, but he had made up his mind very solidly, because right below, in the canyon, the strong were attacking the weak, the armed were approaching the seemingly defenseless, the wrong appeared about to triumph over the right.

Not long before, looking casually down, he had discovered neighbors, though separated from them by a precipice which could only be descended by a long circuitous route.

He knew at a glance they were fugitives, and would have called to them had he not feared his voice would carry farther than desirable.

The pair were strangely mated—youth with old age, May with December.

They crept up the gorge of the canyon, side by side, an old man with gray hair and a splotch of blood on his pallid face, whose steps were guided if not aided by a girl of barely sixteen.

Then, behind them, Banty Billy caught a glimpse of two shadowers, who closed up as they toiled up the steep ascent which led to the level ground below the lad. They were for the moment so nearly in a line with the two who had aroused his sympathies that he hesitated to shoot; and in another were hidden from view, as they veered to the side of the canyon on which the boy was stationed.

"D'unno what a brace like them be doin' round hyer; but them two behind are after misch'f an' no mistake, an' I ain't whar I kin do ther most good, neither. Ef they means murder, ez ett looks jest now, they kin git in their work an' me no chance ter stop 'em. Better hunt up Dandy and we two git a hustle on. Ett may not be too late ter save 'em ef we strike ther ground floor."

The youngster seemed to think nothing of the fact that his own danger might begin if the skulkers once were aware of his presence. He gave another glance downward to make sure man and girl were rapidly drawing towards a point where they would pass out of sight. Then, he turned hastily away.

Meantime, the couple below continued to stagger on, the man growing weaker, while the young girl was rapidly exhausting herself by the aid she was giving him.

Both were unconscious of the pursuit in their rear, though from time to time the girl had given glances in that direction. It seemed to them nothing but chance could throw their enemies on this trail, for they knew little of the skill in tracking which made their boot marks, faint though they might seem, but an open path to those who came after.

An overhanging place in the canyon wall seemed almost like a cavern, and the boulders scattered in front of it offered a fair hiding place. Both felt they could go no farther.

With a last expiring effort of strength

the old man drew himself behind a rock and sank motionless to the ground.

So still did he lie that his companion feared he had fainted, and looked hopelessly around, as if in search of some means with which to revive him.

After a little his eyes opened, and his lips moved, though ever so little. The girl bent over him.

"What is it, uncle? What would you have? What can I do for you?"

"Are you there, Josie?" came softly from between his lips.

He was staring straight at her, yet did not appear to see.

"Yes, yes, uncle, dear. I think we are safe, now, and when you are rested a trifle we will plan what next to do. Fortunately, I have a little food, and there is water near."

"Food nor water will ever trouble me again. The time has come when I must go over another kind of river, and my regrets are to leave you, and that I have not come face to face with poor Wilbur."

"You will not leave me; and you will yet see father in this life. I am sure of it. Do not waste your time and strength with foolish fancies."

"It is but too true, Josie. I am going."

"Do not say so. Your wound is but a trifle."

"True, but then, my sickness prepared me for surrender. The wound, the struggle, the flight, the excitement, the exhaustion, have been too much. Remember."

He spoke painfully, and between gasps. Brave though the girl he called Josie might be, she could not help believing the end near, and her face was darkened with terror, though she tried to keep up an outward show of courage.

"Yes, yes, I will remember."

"That paper—you have it yet?"

"Yes, safely under the lining of my hat."

"Preserve it as you would your life, and place it in Wilbur's hands, with my love."

He had partially risen as he spoke, but now he fell back, while his breath came harder, with more rapid gasps.

"Remember."

Painfully he sobbed out that last word, and then grew still, while down into his glazing eyes gazed the girl, with a deepening sense of hopelessness.

There was nothing now she could do but clasp his hand, and weep silently as she felt it grow colder in her grasp.

Suddenly, her ear caught a slight sound, which seemed made by nearing feet. Half delighted, half frightened, she sprung up to peer over and beyond the rock which shut off her range of view.

Then, she became conscious of the fact that the coming intruders were not altogether strangers. A rifle was aimed at her head, while a hoarse voice rasped out:

"Up with yer hands, gal, an' tell ther old gent ter waltz out ther same way. We got him foul. He's thar, we knows it."

She threw up her hands without hesitation, as, looking straight in the eyes of the desperado, she answered:

"Yes, he is here; but, he will never raise his hands again in this world. Do your worst, you brutes. You come too late."

CHAPTER II.

BAFFLED, BUT NOT BEATEN.

The girl had forgotten her sorrow in anger at the appearance of these men. If she had held a weapon in her hand she would have fought them both.

The fellows stared at the one they had

pictured a timid fugitive, scarcely taking in the meaning of her words at the first.

There was little delay, however. Seeing Josie was not likely to offer resistance—which, indeed, they had hardly expected—they rushed around the boulder, and saw the silent figure lying in its shade.

"Get up, old man!" one of them shouted.

"Thar's no time ter be dodgin' off sick. You got breath enough ter tell whar ter find them papers, ef you ain't got 'em hid on yer, an' we means ter hev yer do ett, ef we hev ter draw blood ag'in."

As he spoke he caught the shoulder of the old man, and gave it a rude shake.

But as his fingers fell away he started back, exclaiming:

"The old fool has got away a'rter all. He's dead."

"Yer off, sure," answered the other, coming forward, though not allowing Josie out of his sight.

"Ett war on'y a few minnits ago we heard 'em chinnin, an' I guess he's on'y playin'. That dodge can't fool me."

"Look at him yerself."

The man did so, dragging the body brutally out where the light fell full upon the face.

The inspection satisfied him beyond a doubt.

"Right yer are, Tom, arter all. Let's see what ther kid hez ter say. He ain't hed time ter git away with them papers, an' ef he ain't got 'em ther gal kin say whar ter find 'em."

Eagerly he examined the clothing of the dead man, turning every pocket inside out, and feeling each seam; but nothing rewarded his search.

"Where did he put them papers, blast yer?" he asked savagely, turning to the girl.

"He had no papers to put anywhere. You and your gang searched him thoroughly enough, once before, to have told you that."

The steady tones of the girl angered the man. He caught her by the arm, snatching her away from his partner.

"Don't be so fresh, kid, er you'll find who's boss ov this outfit. You kin talk, an' blamed ef you won't be made ter talk, one way er 'nother. Mag went over your dunnage er I'd a thought mebbe he hed give 'em ter you. Ef he didn't hev 'em along hyer he's got 'em hid somewhere's, an' you'll tell whar, er die while we're tryin' ter find out."

"I tell you, I have nothing to say. I might lie to you, and send you miles, miles back on the trail, but I have no desire to postpone the final settlement of this. Take me to your captain and I'll tell him just what I have told you."

"Git a stick, pard. Thar's only one way with a bird like this. Ef she kin sing an' won't sing we got ter make her sing. A leetle ov that same whalin' goes a big ways with sich fresh 'uns ez this."

"Yer jest right, pard; but I'd sooner twist her blame leetle neck, an' end ther hull fool racket, ef it warn't fur ther boss. Rod-oil are ther thing ter fisick her talkin' outfit; leastwise, we'll try ett on. Hold her thar a minnit!"

There was no doubt in the mind of the girl about the earnestness of the ruffians, and her brow compressed as she thought of the execution of their threats. For the moment she ceased to think about her dead uncle, and forgot his unburied corpse.

If she was to escape at all it seemed as though this was the time. Fleet and sure of foot as a mountain goat, she believed she could scale the rocks of this canyon

where the men could not, and with anything like a fair start could perhaps outpace them on level ground.

The man who held her prisoner moved with her from behind the rock and looked down the canyon. After all, he was not quite certain about this treatment they proposed. He turned to the girl.

"See hyer, sis! Ther boss hez offered a hundred fur them papers, an' me an' my pard means ter make a divvy ov that same. You kin see yer ain't got a chance ag'in us, it'll be a heap wuss ef we takes yer inter camp. Why not give ett up?"

Josie shook her head, but said nothing. She was furtively picking out a course.

"I tell yer squar' thet ther captain means ter put yer light out, an' ef he gits hold ov yer ag'in he'll do ett. Own up, now, put them papers in my hands an' I'll see that yer gits away. We'll leave yer on ther trail ter Barton's camp, an' I'll see yer ain't follered by none ov ther gang."

She held down her head, and seemed to be listening so intently the speaker actually thought his words were going to be of some avail. There never was a man more surprised than he at what followed.

His hand had dropped from Josie's shoulder as he tried to convince her that he was a friend, and imperceptibly she had edged away a pace or more.

Now, with a sudden spring, she bounded into the air, and before he knew her intent, was upon a jutting point of rock, which it would have taken some minutes for him to reach. His hand dropped to his belt with the instinct of a shooter directing it.

Before the weapon could flash up Josie was out of sight.

She was running desperately, but lightly, along a rough, rugged, broken track, over which neither of the men could possibly have followed at anything like the same rate of speed.

If eyes had not failed her, there was a strong chance this path would lead right on up along the face of the canyon wall, though what might be found when it was surmounted was more than she had even tried to guess.

A yell from her late captor served to redouble her speed; but it also caused his partner to look up, and see the flying figure.

He took in the position at a glance, and did not hesitate.

His rifle was still slung at his shoulder, and he brought it around with the cool swiftness of an expert, raised the hammer, and took deliberate aim, lingering long enough, however, to shout:

"Halt, thar, an' hands up, er by ther livin' Moses, I'll bring yer down!"

There was no slacking of the feet which were winged by fear, and without a second challenge the trigger was pulled.

At that instant Josie was bounding from one point of rock to another which juttet out but a foot or so from the sheer wall.

The bullet hissed just over her shoulder, missing her by only the fraction of an inch. It struck the rock in front of her with a cruel spat, sending up a small shower of sharp little splinters, some of which struck her in the face as she alighted.

The report and the little shock were too much for her.

Up went one arm in an involuntary movement to guard her face, and the hand struck sharply against the solid wall of rock before her.

At that, her footing was lost, and like a wounded bird she went tumbling down from her perch.

CHAPTER III.

BANTY BILLY'S DROP.

The two men below looked upward, and at the moment thought the bullet had done the work, and never dreamed but that she would drop to the bed of the canyon a corpse.

Fortunately, she took no such tumble, or theré would have been an end of all things, even though never touched by the lead.

She grasped at little projections, which served to check her progress even though she obtained no firm hold, until, at last, her fingers clasped a point her feet had already passed, and she hung suspended by the one hand, twenty feet from the cruel rocks below.

"Never t'etched her, pard—an' I reckon ett's most mighty well. We'll hev her now."

"In a box. She can't pull herself up; an' when she lets go I don't want ter see ther squelch."

The marksman had cast down his rifle, and rushed to the foot of the rocks.

"Thar won't be none ef we stands on-der, an' ketches her when she kims. Git a move on, Paddy, er ther boss 'll git it on fur us."

As he spoke he looked upward with outspread arms, calculating the distance.

They were both burly ruffians, and not altogether without a certain vicious nerve and chivalry. Grumbling as he came, Paddy took position beside his pard. He did not fancy risking broken bones, but it seemed possible to him that between them they might break the fall of the girl without serious damage to themselves.

Meantime, Josie hung almost motionless. She felt vainly for a footing, glanced upward to see that there was no hold for her other hand, and then calmly waited for whatever ending fate might force.

If she heard the voice of the men below it was as the noises of a dream. About all she knew was that her fingers were slowly but surely spreading open.

"Say, you up thar, we kin ketch yer ef yer does ez we sez. D'yer hear?"

The shout of Tom somehow brought her back to her senses.

"Yes, I hear. What do you want?"

"Ef you works with us we'll bring yer out all right. Will yer do ett?"

"What is it you want?"

"When we give ther word let go. Will yer do ett?"

"Yes."

"Ready, then! Now!"

Josie's fingers opened altogether, and she shot downward.

The men worked together as though they had been trained to it. The girl was caught in their arms; and though they did not attempt to hold her, the fall was so broken that she struck the ground with a shock by no means dangerous.

The two men staggered back; Josie sprung to her feet. Perhaps she owed them her life, but she trusted them none the more. What would be their next move?

If she had thoughts of again darting away Paddy was as quick to prevent. As she stood erect his hand once more fell on her shoulder, with a more ungentle force than ever.

"No, yer don't, kid. Yer needn't think we're goin' ter let yer off, now. Ett are bizziness with us, with er great big B. Thar's ther stick, an' hyer's yer back. Ef yer don't open out ter bedrock ther one 'll feel t'other."

"Oh, let ther gal hev a chance," interposed the other man.

"She's skeered now, an' can't talk; but when she gits good an' riddy she'll reel ett off straight ez a string. Ef not, we'll know why not, shore. Ov course, she *must* talk."

A frown made these last words more of a threat than the other man had used. Between the two Josie could see but little to choose; and her eyes began to wander around in search of a route should she be able again to break away.

"Blast yer nonsense, Tom; soft soap ain't a goin' ter git ther truth outen her. Thar's nothin' 'll do ett but ther stick, an' ther stick she's goin' ter hev. Kim along, sissy."

Tom folded his arms and stepped a pace backward. He did not altogether approve, but did not care to interfere.

Paddy was already attempting to drag her away, when a new voice chipped into the conversation.

"Say, pards, I'm in this game; deal me a hand. Ef that don't suit, throw up yer own, I got yer lined."

The sharp click of a hammer being forced back emphasized the words, and both men turned swiftly in the direction of the sound of the voice.

The tones might be juvenile, but such a challenge was one in those regions which always commanded attention, especially when a Winchester struck up a preliminary chord of accompaniment.

The butt of Banty Billy's rifle lay along his cheek, and the muzzle pointed in their direction; but the sharp eyes could scarcely be said to be looking through the sights. They appeared to be taking in all three with a roving glance, while the tube, which might be deadly enough, wavered first toward one and then toward the other.

They did not understand much about the boy, and the erratic motion of his gun gave the outlaws confidence. Their hands had not gone up, and now, one of Paddy's went back with a swift dart for the revolver which swung at his hip.

"Trumps led, an' yer uncle takes ther trick!" exclaimed the boy, and without farther aim he pulled trigger.

He never seemed to follow the shot with his eye, but turned his glance to Tom, at the same time preparing for a second shot.

"Stiddy, now, pard!" he warned. "I kin put 'em right whar I want 'em, an' this 'll go betwixt yer eyes ef them hands ain't up in ther shake ov a bar's tail—an' 'bein' short by natur' that don't take long."

The way Paddy was howling might have drowned the words had they been uttered less distinctly. The ball from the Winchester had made nasty work with the handle of his revolver, to say nothing of two or three fingers which happened to be in the way. He was dancing around, flitting the blood from his wounded hand, and altogether too wise from experience to think of making another aggressive movement while that muzzle frowned in that direction.

Tom, not even having a weapon handy, flung up his hands without a word.

"Now, leetle g'al, whar's ther old man?"

"He is dead!" answered Josie, simply.

"Sorry ter hear ett, but so ett goes. We can't have ther funeral tell after this fight are over, an' I don't want yer ter see ett finished. Might give yer bad dreams. Jest step this way, an' go kinder round, so ez yer don't hide ther critters' heads. May hev ter take a line shot on 'em yit, an' bore 'em both."

Josie needed no second invitation, but ran to his side at once.

"Keep on down ther kenyon tell yer kims ter a burro," he whispered. "Mount an' let him go. Don't tetch ther bridle an' he'll take yer in ther way you should go. Skeet, now!"

No second warning was needed. Her present safety was the first thing the bruised, roughly handled, and well nigh exhausted girl thought of. She bounded away with a momentary renewal of strength, while Banty continued to eye the ruffians.

"Nice pair, *you* be!" he said, looking them over.

Paddy was tying up his hand, while the wicked look of one who soon might do something desperate was beginning to come into the face of the other, as he listened to the boy:

"I've seen better men than you be hev ther ha'r cut fur nothin' an' ett didn't do 'em half ez much good, neither. Ef yer goin' ter turn sour I'll hev ter hev both yer scalps; but, ef your way ain't my way, an' yer willin' ter go it, I dunno but what I might be willin' ter let yer slide."

Paddy spoke up:

"Bub, ye kin do ez yer please, but I giv yer warnin'. Ef yer don't, hyer's one ez will still track yer to ther death."

"I'm 'greeable, ef thar's no other way suits yer ter pass in yer checks; but meanwhile you two stand thar tell I tell yer ter move. I'm good fur a snapshot up ter eight hundred yards, an' next time I'll hold plumb fur ther center ov yer bigness."

In spite of Paddy's threat neither man attempted to follow as the boy deliberately backed away. Josie was already out of sight, and it would not take Banty long to get outside of the range of their revolvers. In fact, in another minute he had vanished.

"Slow, an' stiddy, now," warned Paddy as he picked up his broken revolver. "We got ter hev 'em, but ther cub kin bite hard."

They were beyond the point where the walls overhung their base, and scarcely had they taken two steps when, from above, stone after stone came hurling down, in a way which showed an intention to block their pursuit.

Any one of them would have worked terrible harm had it hit, and when, at length, a boulder which might have weighed, perhaps, a quarter of a ton, fell directly in front of Paddy, he turned, followed by Tom, and fled in the other direction.

As they darted away in retreat a series of most blood-curdling yells arose from the top of the canyon wall.

CHAPTER IV. THE BEAR-TAMER.

Josie did not hesitate to follow the orders of her suddenly found friend. Who he was, or where he came from, troubled her nothing. She ran along the gorge without even a thought of the danger into which he was thrusting himself by advocating her cause.

She knew in a moment that she was out of sight of her late captors, and so felt a sense of safety, impossible so long as she might be expecting a bullet in her back. The next thing was to find the burro.

He was there, sure enough, standing in a little niche, with head bowed down and ears drooping. He hardly looked like the sort of charger to bear her fleetly from the fray, but he was better than nothing. She was anxious to leave the spot behind as soon as possible, yet was unable to go on foot. She mounted, and gave the rein as directed.

Dandy was what the burro was called, and he proved himself a dandy, in spite of his looks. He immediately proceeded to assert himself and get over the ground at what seemed quite a furious rate.

For some distance he followed the bed of the canyon, but after going perhaps a quarter of a mile he turned and with a great leap appeared bent on attacking the perpendicular rock.

He was wiser, however, than he seemed, for after a hard scramble up some yards of difficult footing he struck a path which was an easy incline, though no four-footed animal but a mountain burro would have willingly attacked it at such a pace.

Josie shuddered as she discovered how much she had to trust to an animal she had never seen before. Mindful of her late fall, as she rose higher and higher she would have thrown herself off if it could have been done with safety.

That was impossible. There was nothing to do but keep her seat as best she could, and hope Dandy was taking the right course. Once or twice, when the path seemed particularly narrow and full of danger, she closed her eyes, bending down to rest her arms on the pommel of the saddle and hide her face.

It seemed like hours while the journey lasted, though in reality it was but a few minutes. At the very moment she began to think she could not possibly keep her seat to the end Dandy gave a nimble leap, and then stood once more on level ground. By a path known to him and Banty, he had surmounted the canyon wall, and reached the table land from which, in fact, he had descended but a short time before.

The burro made no halt, however, but ambled along near the edge of the chasm, and Josie could not help but notice he was taking her back toward a point above the spot in the canyon where she had met with her late adventures.

The route was reasonably smooth, though here and there rocks were scattered in their path, and back at no great distance low mountains rose up.

It seemed a scene of savage loneliness, and it was natural she should wish for her protector. She yearned for him more than ever a moment later, when Dandy gave a snort, and stood stock still.

Out from behind a huge rock there suddenly marched an immense bear, which finally reared itself upon its hind legs immediately in the path, and opened its cavernous jaws.

The girl gazed at him like one fascinated. Then, seeing he was slowly marching forward in her direction, she gave a tug at the reins, and looked over her shoulder, intending to turn and flee.

What she saw gave her scant consolation. Behind her came a mate for the first beast, every whit as large, and if anything more dangerous looking. Dandy and she were caught between two fires!

Dandy did not take kindly to the idea of Josie's interference. He drew his feet up under him, stuck down his head, and said as plainly as actions could say, he did not intend to budge an inch.

Meantime, from front and rear, the bears were approaching.

Was Dandy never going to move? Josie was almost petrified, and knew but too well that she could not run a step.

The rear bear was the nearer, and when she looked at him again he was so very near she gave a scream of alarm, at which the animal seemed to fall forward upon the burro.

Dandy was not asleep, by any means. He had not been fascinated, if his rider

had, and his stubbornness was not the stubbornness of fear. In the twinkling of an eye he had launched out both hind feet, and landed them with a dull thud against the body of his assailant!

After that, he skipped around so lightly one would never have supposed he carried weight, and let drive again at the foe approaching from the opposite direction.

That sudden turn was too much for Josie, though she was no mean equestrian. It unsettled her in her seat, and when Dandy's heels arose again she went sailing off over his shoulder.

She fell in a little huddle, and fortunately received no harm.

Crouching there, in a little recess between two piles of rocks, she closed her eyes, and listened to the sounds of battle.

For a brief season Dandy held his own remarkably well.

He plunged and kicked; he danced around after a fashion that would have done the heart of a pugilist good to have seen; and over all the noise of the fray rose the sound of the cries which were heard by Banty Billy and the two desperadoes.

At that, Josie probably fainted. For a little she knew nothing.

When she opened her eyes she could hardly believe what she saw.

Dandy was standing in the same drooping attitude as when she first found him; on either side of him stood one of the bears, in as peaceful an attitude as he could assume; while directly in front of her, staring down in a wondering way, was a strange being, the sight of whom sent a thrill of terror through her frame.

The figure was that of a man, of course; but at first glance, save for the scant view obtained of his features, he resembled more one of the animals at his side.

No sign of a hat was there on his head, and his hair, coarse and matted, hung down nearly to his waist, as it trailed over his shoulders, and behind his back, while his beard, of many months' growth, reached down as far in front.

He was clad in skins dressed with the hair on, even to the moccasins on his feet, and the belt around his waist was of the same material.

At his back hung a carbine, and in his belt were two revolvers, and a huge knife, of rude manufacture, as though it had been forged by his own hands.

"Little girl come round allo rightee. What she want here?"

Seeing she was looking at him with anxious curiosity he rumbled out the words, and Josie felt her courage returning as she heard his voice.

Though the man was unmistakably of the white race, he spoke much as an Indian would have done had he spoken at all. Yet, there was nothing savage in his hoarse tones, which were so reassuring that Josie found her tongue at last.

"I want nothing but to get away from the bad men below, who have killed my uncle, who was my only friend."

"What for they kill him?"

"They would have robbed him, for they thought he had hidden treasure. We joined a party to make a journey across the plains, and were betrayed into the hands of outlaws, who searched us, and would perhaps have killed us both. Then, thinking we were too helpless to attempt flight, they were careless, and we made our escape, though my uncle was wounded, and dying. Two men tracked us, but they came too late. Uncle was dead. I made my escape from them, and now do not know which way to turn."

"And, boy—he one of them?"

"No, no! He saved me, though I had never seen him before. Providence must have sent him just at the right time. Then, too, he is brave; oh, so brave!"

"Humph! Brave boy sometimes die soon. Come 'long!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and made a gesture, which meant she should rise and follow him. At the same time the bears looked expectant, and even Dandy pricked up his ears. He spoke carelessly; yet like one who intended to be obeyed. Josie shrunk back in renewed fear.

"Perhaps I had better wait for that boy. He seemed my friend, and I know nothing of you. What would you do?"

"Dunno. Trebizond, the tamer, eat little girls sometimes; mebbe he eat you. Come 'long!"

He bent forward and caught her by the hand. With his other hand he seized Dandy by the bridle, and, turning, stepped away. It made no difference whether they were willing or not; they had to come. When Banty Bruce stole silently up from the canyon he saw in the distance the strange being stalking away. With one hand he held Josie, with the other he led the not altogether unwilling Dandy. The two bears shambled along in the rear of the procession.

CHAPTER V.

BANTY TO THE RESCUE.

It was useless for the girl to resist, and she knew if she did not go of her own accord the strange being who called himself Trebizond would be most likely to carry her. If he did not, perhaps he would turn her over to the tender mercies of the bears, which she now began to see were his own peculiar property.

Forward she went, like one in a maze, taking little heed of her footsteps, and none at all of her surroundings. She only knew they were ascending the higher, broken ground which extended away upward, from the line of the canyon.

But even such doubtful energy as this had to come to an end some time. After awhile her feet refused to move, and when Trebizond stepped on without noticing it she fell forward, dragging along after him.

He looked down, and understood.

"Cyanide!" he exclaimed, looking back; and at the name the largest bear shuffled forward.

Across his back Trebizond threw the girl and again stalked on.

Cyanide was not oppressed by the weight. He could have carried three or four like her. He gave a little "whoof!" of surprise at the unaccustomed load, and journeyed on.

This time Josie knew nothing more until after her journey, for the present at least, was done.

Her strength came slowly back and she found herself in the hermit's home.

It was a small room, built upon a floor of solid stone, and apparently perched in a niche in the rocks which was by no means easy of access.

Through the open door she could see the threshold was the edge of the rock, which seemed to go straight down indefinitely. In fact, the distance was some twenty feet.

For a time Josie said nothing, while the man sat silent, smoking a pipe carved out of a great gnarled piece of root.

He did not look dangerous, and gradually the girl regained confidence, and was able to think connectedly. She clapped her hand to her head, and then looked eagerly around. She had at last missed something, of which she could see no signs in the room.

Trebizond's eyes were on her, but they asked no questions.

"My hat!" she exclaimed.

"It is gone. I—have you seen it?"

The smoker gravely shook his head, and continued to puff at his pipe.

"But I must find it. If it is not here I must go back."

"No go. Way long, and girl not find it."

"I will risk it if you start me on the track. How can I get away from here?"

She spoke from the doorway, to which she had hastened. Below her the ground lay twenty feet away, and the two bears were prowling around on a little plateau, now and then looking up, and sniffing uneasily.

"No get away. No get down. That good. Cyanide and Hyperchlorate no get up. That good. They no eat us while we sleep. Girl hungry?"

"No, no. I could not eat a mouthful. Help me away from here. You do not understand, and I dare not tell you. If anything should happen!"

"If girl no hungry, girl sleep. Trebizond must think. Maybe show her way out by'mbye. Not now."

He pointed to a bunk, covered with tanned hides, and there seemed to be menace in both word and gesture. It was evident he did not mean her to go at present, and if she wished to escape she must throw him off his guard, and then discover some means to elude his vigilance, and scale the descent.

Without a word she went over to the couch and threw herself down. She even closed her eyes, and after a little tried to imitate the long-drawn breath of a sleeper.

In that she was so successful that before long she had really passed into the realm of dreams, and was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

After a time the bear-tamer arose, and looking into the face of the sleeper to make sure her slumber was genuine, slipped out through the doorway. Had Josie been ever so wide awake she could scarcely have seen by what means he took his departure, though she would, perhaps, have been able to guess that he went up rather than down. A few moments later he was stalking towards the canyon, followed by his grizzlies.

He went without any stealth or effort at concealment, though he had reason to know he might possibly meet some who could hardly help but be enemies. The outlaws he had left in the canyon might be prowling around; and there was the boy, who might fancy the taking of Josie, and the capture of the burro, were not exactly the acts of a friend.

After he had successfully backed away from the presence of the outlaws, Banty did not linger to see what it was that was happening to them.

It was better to investigate that from above, especially as he had sent the girl in that direction.

When he came cautiously up by the path over which Josie had ridden not long before, his eyes dropped upon the singular procession just vanishing from sight.

He dropped down instantly, uncertain what to make of it.

"Horns ov Jericho! Thar's Dandy and ther gal; but who is those? An' Dandy seems ter be goin' ov his own willin'ness. Drap me cold ef ett don't beat ther deck. Banty, yer got yerself in a box, an' don't yer furgit it. Reckon them rear guard'd pinch a feller hard ef they caught him a-trailin' 'round ther layout; but reesker no reesker ett's got ter be did."

There was no mistake about it. Banty was in a box.

There was no telling how soon the outlaws would be coming in on him from

the rear, while he did not intend to abandon either his burro or the girl, though to go forward seemed to be full of danger.

"He's takin' ett mighty cool, though," continued the boy, as he saw Trebizond and his retinue disappear without a single backward glance.

"Can't know thet he's foolin' with Banty Billy's property. Ett looks like a hard outfit ter run ag'in, but onless he shows thar's bin some mistake he'll be apt ter find ther beforesed Banty Bruce very much around betwixt now an' ther time when ther game closes. I could do 'thout ther kid, but ther burro I'm bound ter have."

He looked back into the canyon long enough to assure himself the men he had left there were not in sight, and then began cautiously to proceed in the direction taken by the hermit.

It was quite a tramp, but the boy had no difficulty in keeping on the trail, so that eventually he located the mountain-side den of the hermit.

He was obliged to content himself with that, for a time.

The presence of the bears puzzled him.

They seemed to be stationed as sentinels, and as a man who lived in these regions was supposed to understand its business methods he believed they would almost certainly discover him if he attempted to draw near.

He had little fear of them, to be sure, even if they should come out to the attack; but he did not care to have their owner made aware of his presence. There seemed nothing better for him than to prowl around for a while and await developments.

He had a long wait, but at last his patience had a better reward than he had hoped for.

The bear-tamer came to the opening, balanced a moment on the threshold, and then swung himself up, hand over hand, in a nimble way that was astonishing.

For perhaps twenty-five feet or more he climbed, and then, reaching the top of the rock, drew up after him the rope by which he had mounted.

When he went away, accompanied by Cyanide and Hyperchlorate, Banty executed a brief war dance of triumph, and made haste to climb up to the bank out of which jutted the rock in which the retreat was located.

As yet, he had seen nothing of Dandy or the girl, but had little doubt of being able to find them both.

To his delight the rope was lying there, neatly coiled, and the one end fastened to a stout stick, thrust into a cavity in the rock.

He threw the other end over and let himself down without hesitation, swinging into the little doorway with as much precision as though it was all an old story.

The result was, he came face to face with Josie, who gave a little cry of delight as she recognized him.

"Oh, how good! You have come to save me from the madman. Let us get away quick, before he returns."

"Hev ter git a rustle on, then, fur I think he's comin' now. Are yer able to travel?"

"Yes, yes! Hurry. Go back as you came. I can follow. If you had only waited a moment, and said a word, I would have come up, and all this time would not have been lost. I will die if I meet those monsters again."

"Ain't so easy ter die ez all that kims to," said Banty with a shrug of his shoulders, and catching the rope he began to ascend.

CHAPTER VI.

FROM THE FRYING PAN TO THE FIRE.

Banty made no mistake when he said the hermit was returning to the niche.

Fortunately he was still at considerable distance, and the face of the rock against which swung first one and then another small figure was temporarily hidden from view. The two reached the solid ground above without mishap, and hand in hand they scampered away.

"What in blazes did yer do with Dandy, kitten?" asked the boy, giving a keen glance around, in a vain attempt to search out the hiding place of the missing burro.

"I do not know. I guess I fainted before I got here, and have seen nothing of him since."

"Heven't time ter look him up, then. Wouldn't wonder ef ther leetle imp hed tried ter take a bulge on him, an' he'd throwed him over. You're next best, an' I'll get yer outen this an' see him about ett later on."

The day was fast nearing a close, and the darkness would favor the lad. He knew something of this ground, though up to this very afternoon he had never suspected the mystery which had been all along hid in this mountain glen. If Josie only had the strength to follow he had little fear of the result, unless the bears were better and more willing trailers than he believed.

Josie had the strength.

She had to have it, and the boy helped to sustain it with his quaint, low-voiced conversation, as they hurried along. They followed the canyon for some little distance, and then, turning aside, plunged deeper into the fastnesses of the wilderness. There was his camping-ground, which Banty believed would be safe enough, until daylight, at least. They reached it without interruption.

Josie threw herself down, hopeful but exhausted, while Banty began to prepare such frugal supper as his resources admitted of.

The boy was bubbling over with curiosity, but he refrained from asking questions.

The first thing to do was to put some strength into this wilted lily, and after that he had no doubt she would give him an explanation of what he had seen. At present, grief for the loss of her uncle appeared to be somewhat blunted, and it might not be well to open it up afresh, as any questions on his part would have the effect of doing.

Banty was right.

When they had eaten what they cared to from his stock of jerked meat, washed down with spring water, they crouched over the few coals of fire which were alive, and of her own suggestion Josie opened the subject.

"You have called yourself Banty Bruce, and I suppose that is your name. Anyhow, you have been my friend, and I am yours. Can I get back to the spot where you found me?"

"Pends largely on what's in ther road. I ain't allers yearnin' fur a thing because I kin do ett; an' I reckon you better wait a day er so tell we see how ther land are goin' ter lay."

"But I must go back at once; or, at least, when morning dawns."

"Fur why?"

"For one thing, I must see what has become of uncle. For another, I have lost something which I must recover if I risk my life."

"Ef ett's anything more beportant than Dandy you better tell me what she is an' let me try. You kin lay low hyer; an' I

reckon I'm better set up ter wrastle with ther contrack."

"Oh, no! I could not leave it to you, though if you could go with me you would be more than ever my friend, and some day I might be able to pay you well."

"Don't talk ter me about pay. I don't take no jobs that way, when thar's a pore leetle orph'un gal at ther front. Be ye a orph'un, though?"

"That is what I am trying to find out. Uncle and I were on the way to follow up what he thought was a clue."

With this for a beginning she went on to tell a story much the same as she had told to the bear-tamer.

"An' now yer sez yer hez lost s'uthin', an' wants ter go back ter git ett. Better want."

"No, never. And you forget poor uncle. At any risks I must see his corpse is buried, even though I have scant time to mourn over him. I only left him to save myself; but—but—now, I must go back."

"All right. You'll run ett ter suit yer-self, an' I'm with yer. Ef I can't see yer through ther raffle, a feller ov a bigger bigness would n't be ov no use."

The lad was inclined to be boastful, and perhaps not without some reason. His pride was destined to take a tumble.

Keen and quick though his sight and hearing were he was not in the least prepared for what happened.

With a sudden dart a pair of strong arms wrapped around him, pinning his hands to his sides, while a guttural voice at his ear gurgled out a sentence:

"Waugh!"

"Redskin, by mighty!" exclaimed the boy, unable to move, but not at all paralyzed.

"You jest beat my time, an' I ain't got a word ter say. But whar did yer kim frum, anyhow?"

"Bear What Talks here all the time. He hear all white children say, then he take um both. They good maybe he no hurt. They try get away he take um hair, sure."

The boy began to believe the Indian told the truth. It would have been almost impossible to have got into the camp without giving the alarm; in very fact he had been lying almost within arm's length when Banty was listening to the interesting story of his young companion.

It was evident Bear Who Talks intended to consider the pair his prisoners. Without using unnecessary violence he proceeded to twist the wrists of the boy behind him, and knot them together with a piece of green hide.

While he was doing this he glared at Josie, who, on the other side of the fire, remained motionless and mute. The shock of this sudden attack had been too much for her.

Under other circumstances she might perhaps have tried either resistance or flight, but the experiences of the day were capped by this one of the night, and she had no courage left to meet it.

As soon as the boy was rendered helpless for harm his captor became quite friendly. He rummaged around the little camp, finding nothing which appeared to take his fancy except Banty's arms, which at the very outset he had appropriated.

Finally he threw himself on the ground near them.

The fire was burning if anything too brightly, for he had thrown on it an armful of dry fuel to aid him in his

search. By the little glare he studied the faces of his captives, turning first to one, and then to the other.

"Boy shoot, boy trap, boy hunt gold. Talk Bear see him before. What white little squaw do here? Talk Bear not understand that pow-wow."

Josie did not at once answer, and her face showed the fear which she really felt.

The silence seemed to anger the Indian. His face had not seemed altogether vicious before this when it was turned toward Josie, but now it darkened with a scowl.

Josie observed this, and quickly spoke up:

Briefly she told her story over still another time, using the simplest language, and dwelling on the fact that she had no idea of doing more than pass through these regions.

The explanation calmed the redskin; he even looked thoughtful, as though he might be weighing the story, perhaps with an idea of helping her.

"Um. Bear What Talks understand better, now. Good for girl his brothers no find her. They no sabbe. He take care of her, mebbe."

He asked nothing more, and his next movement was not so reassuring, since he proceeded to bind her hands, and fasten her in such a way she could not get nearer to Banty Bruce.

Then he threw himself carelessly down, and before very long went to sleep.

The night wore on after a fashion, even the prisoners obtaining a fair amount of rest and sleep, uncomfortable though they undoubtedly were. When morning dawned Bear Who Talks had no occasion to rouse them, for they were already wide awake. He had Banty's rifle slung over his shoulder, and his revolvers stuck in his belt, so that it was not giving his captives an unwholesome advantage when he cast loose their fastenings.

"No want fool, now. Shoot quick and never miss, boy try run away. Him do, Talk Bear say: Git move on, eat hearty."

"But say, me noble red man, what's yer platform? May save lots ov frickshun ef ye'll open out down ter bed rock. Jest s'posin' I'd make a mistake, an' throw yer cold when you war a frien' after all. Horns ov Jericho! W'ot weepin' there'd be in ther Bruce fambly, which are mostly me."

The boy spruced himself up like a little bantam rooster, while Josie watched him with an admiring gaze. She had seen how he could act on an emergency, and his words did not seem altogether like a braggadocio.

"No sabbe," answered Bear Who Talks, shaking his head. "Boy no eat, boy git weak; Talk Bear take his scalp."

His lips closed tightly after that, and Banty concluded there was no use in making further effort to obtain information. As the provisions were principally his own he made the best of the situation, and finished his meal without another word.

Then, Talk Bear gathered up what was left and stowed the fragments away. With the pieces of green hide which had confined them the previous night he securely tied a wrist of each so that they could walk side by side, and their other wrists behind their backs.

Thus linked together he motioned them to follow the course by which they had come to the camp, and, grimly silent, stalked on behind as they moved away.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN HARD GETS HURT.

The two outlaws who had trailed the fugitives to the canyon had the average amount of courage belonging to such men, but several things had happened to shake their nerve, and when the attack came from above it was no wonder they turned and fled; or, that once going they should not have stopped for some time.

What was the meaning of the terrific yells heard above them they did not know, but there was no mistaking the falling rocks, which had come so near putting an end to them altogether.

They went on up the gorge for half a mile, only stopping when the way became tangled and rough.

They found a place where they would be screened from observation if any one followed directly on their course, and there they crouched down.

"What war ett, Paddy?" asked Tom, after a glance down the canyon to make sure no one was in sight.

"Ber cussed ef I know. You ever bin hyer afore?"

"Mighty few spots in these diggin's I ain't bin. But ett's a year er more sence I tracked this trail, an' then I didn't stay more ner a night. I've heard ov ett, though."

"Ov what?"

"Ther thing what makes them noises. Ef ett hedn't bin fur that mebbe I wouldn't a took ther f'ust boat. Thar war no chance ter hit back, though, an' ett war shoot Luke er give up ther gun."

"Thought yer didn't know."

"So I don't, but thar's suthin'—Injun, white man, ghost, b'ar er howlin' loony-tick, I can't tell which. But when yer tries ter crowd him he allers kills."

"We ain't bin crowdin' him, though."

"What's ther dif' ef he thinks so. Reckon we better skip ther ranch tell ther boss comes. He kin do ez he pleases."

"I'm with yer on that. We ain't got no chance at him from down hyer, an' he kin sling a dornick mighty straight. With that sort ov a hand you ain't fit fur a fight, even ef we could git at him."

"Thar ain't much chance ov his gittin' clost enough jest now. Ett's ten mile 'round by ther nearest route, an' after he hez time ter simmer a leetle we'll skip out."

"Sooner ther better."

"Yes, but I ain't furgittin' biz. Ther gal'll go driftin' back down ther kenyon; an' we'll pick her up on ther way, er crowd her out ag'in ther boss ez he kims up. An' thar's that boy, cuss him!"

"Who is he? Like ez not he's got backin' somewheres nigh er he wouldn't hev crowed so loud."

"Blast him, he ain't ther kind as needs backin'. Never set eyes on him afore, but I knowed him soon ez I seed him. Ett's ther fresh young kid ez scooped ther deck at Bent's Crossin' when thar war a big rifle match thar last fall. He took f'ust prize then, an' cleaned out Rio Ralph when he tried ter cut up rough with him."

"But he ain't out hyer alone."

"That's his style. Sez he's his own pard. Prospects, hunts, traps, an' anything else ez kims to his hand. Quick ez lightn'in, an' full ov grit ez a sand bar. Ef yer goes fur him yer wants ter do it a holdin' ther drop; an' that won't do yer much good onless he's dead."

"Dead goes. He's my mutton, an' sooner er later I'll hev him."

It was policy for more reasons than one to remain in hiding for a little. That would not only give the assailant above

time to turn his attention in some other direction, but would throw the two fugitives whom they hoped to overtake off their guard.

"Mind yer, ef we git ther bulge on the boy, thar's ter be no nonsense; down he goes."

This was Paddy's speech as they started out; and swiftly but cautiously they beat down the bed of the canyon.

As they passed the place where the late unpleasantness began they saw a white, upturned face, with dropped jaw and staring eyes, but they only hurried on the faster. There was no thought in their minds to stop and bury the dead man.

In these remote regions there were wolves and vultures. To them the duty was left.

But some distance farther on they did halt. They had already not only the steps of the girl but the footmarks of the burro.

"Say, Paddy, ther gal war wuss skeered than we war. She drapped her hat an' didn't take time ter git ett. Ef she's kept up that gait she's half way ter Prescott by this time."

"Ain't a blamin' her. Ef I'd hed ther chance I'd a gone ther same way, too."

"But ef she gits out ov this afore ther boss heads her off we may lose her ag'in. That boy ain't no slouch, an' he kin steer her inter safe hidin'."

"Ther boy ain't found her yit, an' ef he does we kin trail 'em both. All ther same, we'll take ther hat along ter show ther chief. He'll know then he's on ther lead, sure."

There could be no mistake about the article.

It was a soft, felt, wide brimmed sombrero of the finer sort, evidently made for woman's wear. The stout rubber band by which it had been secured to Josie's head had broken at the one end, and in the excitement of the moment she had never noticed its drop.

Paddy stooped and picked it up, fastening it to his belt by the broken band.

As they hastened along they kept a keen lookout for any possible hiding place, but it is needless to say found nothing of the fugitives, traces of whom had vanished.

Three or four miles away, the canyon, which had rapidly been growing shallower, debouched upon the plain.

Eagerly they glanced in every direction, not giving more than a passing glance at a little party which they saw approaching in the distance. Their first desire was to try and get a glimpse of Banty Bruce, and his young charge.

It seemed a little strange there had been no visible trace left, or any mark to show at what point they had left the gorge.

"Ther boss are coming, anyhow," muttered Paddy. "Reckon we better be gittin' our leetle story riddy. He's a mighty oncertain man ter deal with when he thinks yer ain't done yer level best."

"Let him come. We got proof we found ther gal, an' he'll hardly be thinkin' you ripped up yer hand that way, yerself. Take ett easy. I'm tired meself."

It was pretty certain the party would come directly to the spot, and both of the men were tired enough already. They dropped down to the ground and waited.

It was a wait of no long duration.

Evidently they had already been seen, and the party came up at a gallop. In the lead was a man of middle age, who had black, yes, dark, flowing hair, and a cruel mouth. His build was powerful, and he held his seat in the saddle like a Centaur.

"What news, you?" he called as he came within speaking distance.

"That's ez yer take ett. We found this up ther kenyon. Fact are, ther old man hez passed in his checks, an' we'd a hed ther gal ef a party hedn't chipped on ther sly, an' give Paddy that hand. Ett all makes a nice leetle story, an' when you've heard ett you'll know what ter do. She's in ther box somewheres, an' it won't be hard ter put a finger on her."

Tom pointed to the hat, and then to his partner's hand, as he spoke. It was easy to show they had been on not altogether a bootless quest. The chief frowned as he listened, and harshly put a few questions.

Tom could be terse enough when necessary, and in a few words explained what had happened. He had no doubt the boy and girl were in hiding somewhere up the canyon, from which there seemed to be no means of escape. There was yet time enough to roust them out before the darkness came down. There was a spot near which would serve as an admirable camping ground, and little time would be lost.

The search began without delay, but though the canyon was swept from the mouth to a point beyond that at which the two men had halted in their retreat from the nameless terror above, nothing was found.

Strangest of all was the fact that the body they had left under the overhanging rocks had vanished. Had it not been for some unmistakable marks which Paddy pointed out the captain might have thought the story told him was a fabrication.

The corpse had been cleanly carried away; and as that was certainly beyond the powers of the girl it was evident some one else had taken a hand. Whether the boy would have the needed strength was doubtful. The rocks told nothing, and the marks on the soft ground were all accounted for. The disappearance remained unexplained, and the captain was face to face with a mystery.

Various unavailing efforts were made to climb the walls of the canyon, and considering the chance that the fugitives had made their escape by some hidden path there was nothing to do but go over the ground again, while sending out explorers to search for a path from the lower end, which might lead up to the banks above.

But search as they might, when night closed down they had found no traces which could point with any exactness to the direction in which the missing ones had vanished. There was much ground to cover, and it almost began to look as though Josie had escaped for good.

Watch was kept but laxly around the camp that night, and as the hours wore on even the two men who should have been on guard were sleeping. The chief lay with his head pillowed on his saddle, slumbering to all appearance as soundly as any one, but sometime after midnight a noise among the horses awakened him.

They were restless, uneasy, and several times snorted as though they scented an enemy. As the captain bounded to his feet and stared around him in the moonlight he saw they were huddled together in a close body, and while he looked the same terrific yells arose which had assailed the ears of Tom and Paddy.

Instantly the camp was up and in confusion; but before any one had fairly gained an understanding of what was happening the horses dashed away in a mass, while clinging to the back of the last of them was a strange figure, whether man or beast it was hard to tell.

"It's a mountain lion got among the horses; after them!" shouted the chief; and snatching up their weapons the men darted off, leaving him alone.

"A lion it was," he muttered to himself; "and yet there is something about it I do not understand. It almost looks as though the brute had interfered in an Indian stampede. There may be other prowlers. It is worth while to investigate."

Bending low he cautiously stole out towards the spot from which the horses had started.

There was nothing suspicious to be heard or seen, yet from time to time he halted and crouched down.

Finally, just as he was rising from one of these moments of pause, a form loomed in front of him with startling suddenness, and before he had time for word or act an awful blow felled him senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

CLOSED IN FOREVER.

The march which Banty Billy and his fellow captive were compelled to take was a long and somewhat tiresome one, but not altogether beyond their strength.

Bear Who Talks strode along in inscrutable silence save when now and then he briefly directed their course. At times he led the way, again he fell in behind. At no time did he leave much trail, and for the most part none at all, though it was doubtful if he feared pursuit.

They halted for dinner at a spring, and the wrists of the leashed couple were unbound. When they were ready to start again Talk Bear made a proposition, and thinking altogether of his companion Banty accepted it, giving his parole for the afternoon with ready cheerfulness. After that their journey was much more comfortably made.

Whither they were going puzzled the boy. In low tones he spoke several times to Josie, but as each time their captor looked frowningly at them he gave up the idea of discussion.

During all the long journey nothing happened worth relating.

Finally, by a hidden path they went down into a little valley walled around by precipitous hills, and followed for some little distance the first appearance of a path they had met with that day.

At that moment Banty was in the lead; and he stopped suddenly. In the pathway appeared a girl in Indian costume. In her hand she held a bow; and to this she fitted an arrow with a suddenness which almost took away the breath of the boy as he watched her.

He was entirely weaponless; but had he been ever so well armed he would have had scant time for defense, so swiftly did she throw up her weapon, all ready for deadly work.

No twang of the string followed, however.

Her recognition of the one who brought up the rear was as swift as her motions. She loosened the string softly, thrust back the arrow to its quiver, and without a word turned and walked away.

Banty remained as stoical as a red Indian would have been. His foot never hesitated a moment in its rise and fall, and he went on as though he had never seen the young intruder.

Josie carried it off almost as well. She started at the sudden apparition, but no sound passed her lips, and she stalked along by the side of her friend without any other show of interest.

Talk Bear perhaps saw the girl before she had time to vanish, but if so he gave

no evidence of the fact. He came to the front, presently, and the two followed him without a word.

In a few moments several Indian lodges were in sight, and towards these they made their way.

Into the largest the three stepped, and the Bear Who Talks said something to the girl they had already seen, and to the elder woman who was there with her. As he spoke in an Indian dialect Banty could not understand a word, but shrewdly suspected the remarks were not particularly savage. The woman, who was evidently a full-blooded Indian, looked at Josie, and then motioned her to a resting place on a pile of skins. Josie obeyed the signs without hesitation, whilst Banty, seeing no one was paying any attention to his comfort, took a seat on the earth floor, wrapped his arms around his knees, and stared quizzically around. He had expected to be led into an Indian village, and submitted to Indian curiosity, if not to torture.

It did not take long to understand that he was a prisoner who would be watched, and that any attempt at escape would be at his own great risk.

For once in his life the boy was thoroughly tired, whilst his companion was almost exhausted. Things did not look very immediately dangerous to either, and not long after they had eaten the supper provided for them the two were asleep as soundly as though they were in the safest of homes.

They slept just as well, and when they woke in the morning had just as good an appetite. Later on, Talk Bear in his terse way introduced them to the girl of the bow, who, they easily understood, was to be their guardian and jailor.

"Boy good, boy stay; Wandega take care him and girl. Boy be rough, boy try run away; Wandega shoot, doubly quick. Big park here, he stay right here all be 'way up. Try go out, that be bad all round. Wandega shoot, red men scalp, bad men cut throat sure. Sabbe?"

"Yer right I sabbe; but yer don't 'spect me ter stay hyer furever 'thout knowin' what's comin' ther next day. How long's this thing goin' ter keep on? An' what sorter game yer settin' up, anyhow?"

"Talk Bear no talk he tell no lie. Mebbe all go right, mebbe all go wrong. Who know? Wait and see."

Wandega stood by with a ghost of a smile on her face.

She did not look as though she would be a very savage jailor; but, to tell the truth, Banty would sooner it had been some one else picked out to act as guard.

She seemed to be a couple of years younger than Josie, and was a good specimen of an Indian beauty in the early stage of development. A man, or even an old hag, Banty would have been willing to take in preference, because he would expect some day to turn in for a fight, regardless of consequences. Wandega was another article altogether, to which he took a liking on the spot, and which he decided, after his swift way of jumping at a conclusion, he would not be apt to harm. He had seen Indian girls before, but this was different from the best of them.

The place they were in was a pocket among the mountains, and though Banty could guess at the route by which they had entered he was not sure he could find it again without some little exploration.

That day he had abundant opportunity to explore the valley, though it was in the company of Josie and their young jailor.

The latter was silent as a sphinx, yet was not altogether an uninteresting com-

panion. She guided them around, and Banty could not help but admire the unrestrained grace of her movements, or the intelligence which shone in her face. Now and then he found her looking curiously at him, and perhaps pityingly. Probably she suspected what was to be his fate. He tried to enter into a conversation on the subject, but she shook her head in a way which indicated she did not understand. After that he confined his addresses to Josie, who was not by any means as much cast down as he expected to see her.

She even hinted to him that, since her uncle was gone, perhaps this was as good a thing as could have happened to her.

She was safely out of reach of the outlaws who had pursued her, and from whom escape might not have been so easy under other circumstances; and was not without hope that Bear Who Talks would assist her in the search which she had not altogether abandoned.

They wandered around with apparent freedom; but Banty Bruce noticed certain spots were avoided, and formed his own conclusions. There was no trace there of a road to the outside world, but he scented a mystery.

Bear Who Talks was absent, and this would have been the time to have attempted escape if other things had been favorable. But the day went by in seeming content, and when night came the end appeared as far off as ever.

What the little hermitage meant was a question the boy asked himself more than once. He was even thinking it over as he lay awake an hour after he might have been supposed to be asleep. A hand suddenly laid on his shoulder aroused him from the reverie into which he was falling.

"Come," whispered a voice in his ear.

"All right, I'm coming ef yer think ett's time fur a strike," he answered, swiftly rising. "Ef I hed my way though, I'd continner ter lay low fur a season. Ef yer thinks ter fool Wandega this early in ther season I'm afeared yer off. Her black eyes'll be peerin' round. An' she kin shoot a mighty close string."

"Oh, but Wandega is going along. There is something strange about it, and I scent danger in the air, but if I understand her she will show us a place of safety."

"Holy Caesars! Are that so? Then, we'd better be up an' a-moovin'."

Wandega was waiting just outside, and she led them at a rapid pace, aiming for that very spot in the side of the bordering mountains which she had avoided the day before.

She evidently knew the route, for she clambered up behind a jutting boulder which concealed an opening, and then led the way into the side of the mountain.

Yet, at the mouth she halted for an instant to listen, and they heard the crack of several distant rifles break the stillness.

Their guide drew Josie, and Josie caught the sleeve of Banty, who yielded to the touch. They stepped back a few paces. Wandega lighted a lantern, and passing by them returned again to the entrance.

Banty watched her without understanding her efforts. She was working at a lever. It was only when it rolled forward he saw she was prying at a great stone.

Lazily it settled into the entrance, and then stopped, blocked by a couple of little stones over which it could be forced, but beyond which it would not go of its own accord.

The girl threw down the pole she had

been handling, and stepped back—just in time. A few detached bits of rock and gravel fell at her back as she passed; and then, just behind her, a huge rock whose weight must have been tons settled solidly down, with a slow, grinding crush like the sliding of a mountain.

"Horns ov Jherico!" spluttered Banty Billy, for once in his life appalled.

"You've went, an' gone, an' done ett!"

"What?" asked Josie, in a tone of awe, though not as yet recognizing the full nature of the catastrophe.

"Closed up ther openin' furever."

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPED IN THE CANYON.

The night attack did no serious harm to the outlaws, after all.

The captain came to his senses by and by, to find that outside of a badly bruised face he had received no great damage. By the time he had staggered back to camp the men were coming in again.

They had recovered all the horses save one, which had separated from its fellows and been lost in the darkness. As it bore the strange animal which had stampeded the herd the chances were it would be dead if discovered.

There were spare horses with the outfit, so that this one was no great loss, and it was not strange that little time was lost searching for it. Before long the camp had settled down again to silence, but not altogether to slumber. The captain kept to himself the mishap he had met, but what he said put the sentinels on their mettle, and left the two careless ones in doubt of what might happen to them in the morning.

In the morning the negligence appeared to have been overlooked, and bright and early the search for the trail of the missing ones was begun.

There were good trackers there, but chance was against them, so far as being able to point out the route which the girl had taken; whilst the traces they found of the passing of Trebizond were unsatisfactory, and told next to nothing.

Yet, it was certain she had gone in some direction, and to linger longer there was useless. When the different searchers had got together, and all had reported failure, it seemed time to move on.

The chief looked over his men before he spoke, and saw their faces were dark. He knew what they wanted, and spoke accordingly:

"Men, we started out on the trail for gold, and whatever you may think we have never turned aside from it. It is true we have apparently wasted some time with an old man and a girl, and you have thought that was only a matter of private vengeance. You were wrong. While we may find the spot for which we were aiming without them, had all gone well we would have made it a certainty."

A murmur ran through the crowd. To tell them this after one fugitive was dead and the other vanished was a sore trial.

"Oh, you need not feel discouraged. I have not given up all hope of getting from them even yet all that we need or desire."

Paddy could not keep silent.

"Boss, ef yer goin' ter hev a chat with ther old man count me out. When et comes ter raisin' a spook I ain't in ett."

"Steady, you! This is no jest. That old man was going to the one person who knows where the bonanza lies. I was after him because he had the directions. How he hid them I cannot understand, but before he died you can bet yer life he passed them along to the girl."

"But whar's ther gal?"

"Gone straight to the spot, or I'm much mistaken. We already have an idea of the direction, and so there is no use wasting more time here. There are a dozen points where we have a chance, and at one of them we must strike her trail."

"But, a gal like her can't traipse ett over ther mount'ins."

"Not by herself; but she has one guide, if not two. When we meet them those guides must go down hard. If they can't win themselves they would bring in the outside world to take a share, and that is what we won't have. Make ready; we begin the march at once."

"All right; but, boss, ef we overhaul ther boy I claim ther settlement with him. He's little, but when one slings lead ez he does it makes him ov the size of anybody. I'll give him a fair show, but I'll turn him down sure."

As Paddy held up his bandaged hand no one there failed to understand him. If Banty Billy dropped into his clutches there would be something like murder done.

In half an hour they were all streaming along the right hand side of the canyon; and at last they came upon unmistakable sign showing Josie had passed that way.

It was only a scrap from her clothing, but it was instantly recognized. In which direction she had gone was not so sure.

Two courses were open, either one seemingly trending towards a notch in the mountains away off in the distance.

The captain searched the ground thoroughly, but found no footmarks near. It looked as though the fragment might have been wafted from a distance by the wind.

The party divided, and looked farther. By and by there was a signal from the captain's lips. Another fragment was found, and the two gave him a direction.

Detaching a couple of men, so that no possible chance in the other direction should be thrown away, the march was kept up on this more assured line, until sundown.

Track or trail there was none, and the march grew more and more tiresome. The wilderness grew more profound. A hundred foes might be lurking within gunshot and yet unseen. It was a relief to come at last to the narrow pass or canyon which the notch in the mountain crest had signalled from afar.

There was a chance inside for an ambush, but of that, so he was not caught between two fires, the captain was willing to take the chances.

If he could be surprised it would be because he deserved it.

The way grew still narrower, though as for an ambushade, there seemed but little chance, unless they came suddenly upon an enemy in turning one of the bends in the canyon. Other place for hiding there seemed to be none.

"Looks ez though we might strike s'uthin'," said Paddy, edging up to the chief, and peering shrewdly around. "Seems ez though I'd heard ov this afore, an' I wouldn't wonder ef we hit float rock afore we're many hours older. Ef ett war my say-so I'd reemark thet we'd purty nigh got thar."

"Where?"

"Ter whar ther gold jest lies in big dornicks, bright an' solid ez yer please. Hope ther boys won't strike ther sign tell your riddy ter stop. Ef ett should pan out like ez I heard ov, a drove ov hosses couldn't make 'em budge."

"And who told you all this?"

"An old side pard. First off I didn't understand what you war tryin' ter git

through yer, fur he didn't tell me whar it war. But he sed ett war dangerous ground. Look out yer don't find ett so."

"And that pard—where is he now?"

"He sed he war goin' back; an' I reckon he's went. Leastwise, I ain't seen ner heard ov him ag'in. Ef he's passed in his chips I wouldn't wonder."

"He told you of a pass like this?"

"Fur a fack—with a valley beyondt ett whar thar war diggins ov untold gold."

"Did he say anything of that?" said the captain, with sudden fierceness, as he halted and caught the wrist of the man beside him.

As they turned the bend which had shut it from their sight they came face to face with a huge wall of almost perpendicular rock directly athwart their course, effectually barring farther progress.

And almost at the same moment from above they heard the same unearthly noises that had assailed Paddy and Tom in that other canyon, while rocks again began to fall, not in scattering volleys, but in an avalanche which threatened fairly to fill the gorge. With the wall before them and the landslide behind them, they were caught in a trap.

CHAPTER X.

EASY ANDY GETS IN TROUBLE.

Tom Bogan would have sooner had his pard Paddy detailed with him for the independent search; but the man told off by the captain would do very well for a pinch, and the two pushed on, though neglecting no chance for obtaining information.

To them, the ground, where it was open for impressions, was like a printed book.

The only trouble was that the pages, so far as they were meeting them, appeared to be blank.

At the close of the first day they turned in at a convenient camping ground, determined to make the most of it, as there was no telling what they would strike on the morrow. They knew where they were to go; but it was not so certain what they would meet with when they got there, or even what lay between.

"I say, Ike," said Tom as he lit his pipe, and cast himself down by the smouldering little fire, after they had finished their scanty supper. "Ett looks ez though we's elected fur blame hard times, an' no profit."

"Orter told that to ther boss. Mebbe he'd a made em easier."

"Yes, with a six an' a hunk ov lead. I don't like his way ov answerin' a permiskus remark. But, say, Tom."

"Say ett."

"I don't like ther looks of things. Mebbe ett's a squar' deal, an' mebbe ett ain't; an' sposin' ther ain'ts hev ett?"

"What's workin' through yer cabeza? Ef yer got ary thing ter say why don't yer spit ett out? This ain't prezackly fun amazin'; but thar be things ez are wuss."

"I kin trust yer?"

"Shore."

"We bin in with ther boss sum time, eh?"

"Quite a while."

"An' ef he wanted ter quit ett might not be comfortable ter hev us layin' 'round?"

"Not ef he wanted ter jump this game and turn a sharp corner."

"That's what. I don't say fur shore, but I got a idear what ther game might be he's after. Five thousand ain't a big pile by ettself, but ef he could drop us

all in ther shuffle, an' slide off to a new trail, mebbe it would be wuth lookin' at."

"Ain't none ov us what wouldn't jump at ther chance."

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. But hyer's what set me thinkin'."

Tom drew from his pocket a handbill, which he carefully unfolded, and bent down closer to the low fire.

"\$5,000 REWARD.—The above reward will be given for the return of Miss Josephine Lorton to her friends. She has been missing since the 13th day of April. Is supposed to have been enticed away by a man pretending to be her uncle."

So he read the words out, in a hesitating, uncertain manner, deciphering them with evident difficulty by the faint glow of the smouldering fire.

"That's ther way ett starts out, an' then ett gives ther descriphun thet fits 'em ter a ty-t."

"An' who pays them five thousand, an' whar does they hail frum?"

"That's tellin' tell I know ef yer takes ther same view ez I does. Part ov me capital ef I concludes ter start in biz fur meself. How does ett strike yer?"

"Mebbe thar's s'uthin' in ett; but, pard, ett takes money ter buy land. Why didn't yer open up ter Paddy. Yer hed ther chance."

"Paddy can't see anybody but ther boss, an's afeared ter crook a finger crostways."

"But like ez not it's a heap good ways ter whar ther folks ez put out thet bill hails frum. Ef we got ther gal how we goin' ter git her thar?"

"Easy ez rollin' off a log, but I ain't tellin' all I know—yit. Mebbe you'd like ter ax ther boss."

"Skassly. Not tell I know what you wants ter do about ett."

"Ett's this way. When cap are on deck thar's no use fur us ter monkey with ther layout. But ef we should hev ther chance all by our lonesome selves ter talk ett over with ther young leddy I reckon we'd better not be in a hurry ter hand her over ter him tell we git her side ov ther story, an' make sure thar ain't a pile ov rocks in ett fur us two."

"That's right. Shake, pard. Thar hez seemed s'uthin' queer all along 'bout his goin' an' comin'; an' ef he started out ter throw off on us I can't see ther reason we shouldn't make a ten strike ef we kin. Now, read us ther rest ov ett, will yer? Ett gits mighty interestin' ther more yer goes along."

"Time enough fur that in ther mornin'. You jest sleep on what I tole yer, an' see ef yer be in ther same 'pinyun when yer wakes up. I'm goin' ter bunk in now. Don't reckon thar be danger hyer."

"But say, ef this be so we're out. Boss hez ther short track, onless we head him off. Thar's no sign she went this way, an' ett's just a fool ride we're takin'."

"Fool, nothin'. I've seen what I've seen, an' you an' me is on ther right track."

For reasons of his own Tom did not care to talk more at present, and without having laid their plans any farther the conversation closed. Tom was asleep before many minutes had passed, but Ike lay for a long time smoking his pipe. What he had heard excited him, and his nerves were all on a quiver.

Perhaps he considered it fortunate they had been so when he heard a stealthy step near the camp, and glancing in the direction of the faint noise saw a figure suddenly crouch down out of sight.

Silently but swiftly he slipped his hand on his revolver, thumb to hammer, and waited for the next development.

As he did so he heard the harsh creak of a cocking rifle; and was sure a muzzle was being aimed in their direction. He threw his own revolver forward to cover the spot where the skulking figure had vanished.

Friends he was not apt to meet with in such shape; and if it was a foe he wanted to be ready for him, though knowing that he was at a disadvantage.

He continued silent and motionless in the hope that the skulker would come closer, and lose some of his caution; but though he waited what seemed a long time he heard nothing more. Then, Ike rolled over, opening his eyes.

"What yer doin' thar?" he mumbled, seeing the unnatural position of his pard, and yet not wide enough awake to realize there might be danger.

On the still night air the sound would carry a distance; and it reached other ears, for which it was not intended.

Out of the darkness came an immediate answer.

"Say, pard, ef yer white, help! Ther brute hez got me down."

Something more the stranger would have said, but his speech ended in a sudden break, as though his mouth had been violently joweled to the ground, and there was a savage snarl from some wild beast. Tom Bogan and his pard sprung to their feet.

It might be only a dodge to throw them off their guard, but of that they did not think. The fire still smouldered, and there was a brand which only needed a little urging to make it burst into a flame.

Tom caught it up, whirled it around his head, and then, holding it in one hand and his revolver ready in the other, cautiously advanced, Ike stepping along nervously in his rear.

The glare of the torch was, if anything, a disadvantage, but it was for the sake of safety more than of sight. Finally, Bogan made out a crouching figure and then a pair of fierce, glittering eyes.

He raised his hand, yet forbore to shoot. Beast though it was, something lay under its paws.

As he hesitated the brute launched itself through the air, in a fierce, unexpected spring.

Bogan fired one wild shot as it came, and then went down as though a mountain had fallen on him. Ike, staggering back, received what seemed but a second later, a blow which sent him well nigh senseless to the ground.

It was the stranger who first got to his feet.

He had received no serious injuries, for he paid no attention to himself; but examined the two men with some anxiety.

"What—what war ett?" asked Tom Bogan, looking wildly around.

"Stiddy, stranger pard. Ett war one ov ther old man's pets, an' I reckon she didn't mean ter do me ary harm. But she's a holy terror frum headwaters."

"And who are you?"

The stranger shook himself, and felt limbs and clothing to make sure he had received no damage. Then, he peered up cautiously at the two strangers before answering:

"I'm Easy Andy, perspector, an' a squar' man. I bin a yearnin' fur a pard, an' I reckon I've found ther squar, article. What yer say? I've struck a holy old bonanzer, an' that cat war one ov its keepers."

CHAPTER XI.

CINNAMON MOLL.

The outlaws, at the first moment, were only too glad over their escape to think much of the ugly position in which the landslide left them.

No one had been hurt, though some of the huge rocks came perilously near.

When the dust had settled, however, and they had time to look around they were not so thankful, though the attack seemed over.

Though it might be possible in some way for a man to scramble out, it was pretty clear the horses could not surmount the huge mass that closed up the gorge behind them, while the rock in front effectually barred farther advance.

What was to become of the brutes? They cowered together in the close quarters into which they had been forced, and seemed to realize the danger impending.

Among the men there was visible confusion, but the sharp voice of the captain called them to themselves, and when it seemed certain there was no more to follow they began to look around.

The canyon walls went up sharply, and the pile left by the avalanche was almost as perpendicular. There was danger, too, that any attempt to scale it, or make it more passable, would cause it to topple in on their side. Well, it was not attacked before a careful view of the situation had been taken.

Even after leaving the horses behind it would require judgment and skill to escape.

Several attempts made by one of the men resulted in failure, and the captain was just about to make an effort himself when they heard a voice from above.

It was on the side opposite to the one from which the slide had taken place, and narrow as the chasm seemed below, it was wide enough at the top to prevent a leap, whilst neither of the walls across reached high enough to furnish passage.

The captain craned his neck up and saw a round object, just at the edge of the ledge, which gradually resolved itself into a human head, with a dusky face, and black hair streaming down on either side.

"What white men do there? Them in heap fix."

"Ett's a Navaho squaw, sure ez guns," whispered Paddy. "Mebbe she's frien'ly, an' ez likely not. Treat her fair."

The captain did not heed the warning. He understood who was the visitor above, and how they were at the mercy of even one.

"Yes, we are in a fix. Help us out if you can. The ground caved in. I think it was started by some one. Did you hear those yells?"

"Heap hear. That Dark Mind do it. He great chief. Mebbe I no better help. Him killum too queek him get mad."

The squaw spoke more plainly than had been expected, and shook her head solemnly, showing she had considerable reverence for this Dark Mind of whom she spoke.

"Get us out of here and we'll take care of him. See your people and get a rope. It will be safer for us than to risk scrambling up these loose stones. If they had not wedged in when they fell they would have been over us. They may come down yet."

"Cinnamon Moll has rope. Bring um up you pay dollar."

"Yes, yes. Gladly. Can't you get some of your people to help?"

"Need no help, an' they take dollar. Moll hold one end, white man climb one."

It was forty feet or more down, but the rope she showed a moment later

came squirming down with plenty to spare.

The captain caught the end, and having given a strong pull to test its safety, worked his way upward swiftly.

He scarcely more than glanced at the squat figure which met him, but looked keenly to the other side of the gash in the mountain side, and then ran swiftly along, until he could get a view of the other side of the mass of rock which had fallen into the gorge.

"It can be done, boys," he called down. "We can save the horses, but it will take work. Come up, all of you but Nellis. He can stay to look after them. The sooner the better."

"Reckon not," growled the man singled out for the unpleasant duty.

"Ther critters'll hev ter run their-selves. Dark Mind may kim back, an' I ain't hevin' him ketch me in no sich box. Ef I don't go the rest ov 'em stays."

There was reason for his having been selected to remain behind, since he was the heaviest man in the party, and under other circumstances the breach of discipline might have been harshly dealt with, but the captain was in no humor to have an insurrection.

"All right. Come up first of all. And, boys! If the rope breaks shoot him when he falls. There will be that much satisfaction, anyhow."

Nellis would have drawn back. After that much warning he was not sure but what he would be shot on his arrival above.

"Roust him up! If you are in no hurry I am, and if he don't get a move on I'll leave you to settle it till I get back."

"Steady up there, then. I'm coming."

Without hesitation he caught at the rope, and came up nimbly, hand over hand, touching his hat deferentially as he rose to his feet on the rock above.

"Let me take hold, boss. I've got the weight."

One after another they swarmed up, while Cinnamon Moll stood stolidly watching.

When the last man was up she waddled forward, and taking the rope with one hand extended the other.

"You pay dat dollar now?"

The captain had no desire to evade the indebtedness, and gave her the coin promised without hesitation.

She put it between her teeth for a moment while she coiled up her lasso, which she swung over her shoulder.

Then, from some hidden pocket she drew out a buckskin bag, which seemed already heavy with coin, and dropped this one with the others. It chinked musically as it slid in, and as she put the pouch out of sight Moll turned away.

"Say, Moll, it's another dollar if you can show us a short way down yonder."

Moll turned her head, and saw the captain pointing to the rear of the wall below them.

For answer she held up the rope again with one hand, while with the other she swept around in a circling direction. Unless they were lowered down they would have to track the edge of the gash until they came again to the mouth.

"All right. Loan us the rope."

"Moll sell rope five dollars. No wear out for nothin'."

Under other circumstances the offer might not have been kindly received, but it was not certain how much backing was behind her, and the outlaws were in no condition to provoke a conflict with any band of Indians which might be in the neighborhood.

To the disgust of some of the men the transfer was made.

Then, Moll again turned away, while the captain, followed by most of the men, dropped over into the gorge. Only two were left above, of whom Paddy was one.

Work below began at once. Paddy turned to his comrade.

"You kin 'tend ter all that's wanted hyer fur a while; hold on. I'm goin' ter see whar ther squaw went to."

She was out of sight, but Paddy had an idea she was not far away.

Nor was he wrong.

He found her leaning against a rock, counting out the coin which her buckskin pouch contained.

Stealthily he approached the spot, imagining he was doing it without detection; and finally rose up at her side.

"Moll, girl, you ain't no need fur sich treasures, an' I hev. S'posin' yer makes us a frien'ly loan."

He caught at her wrist with one hand, while with the other he made a snatch at the buckskin, and was altogether unprepared for what followed. Her hand closed swiftly on her treasures, and swinging the fist around she delivered a blow straight between the eyes, that sent Paddy sprawling backward.

"White man no fool with Cinnamon Moll," she hissed.

"If he do she shoot um very much dead."

Out came a revolver as she spoke; but just then Paddy was not likely to fool around anything. The blood was gushing from his nose, and it was a pretty sure thing that in a few minutes both eyes would be as black as a stove pipe. She waited a trifle, and receiving no answer again waddled away.

CHAPTER XII.

PADDY BUILDS A WALL.

"Wonder ef there's any other way out?" mused Banty Bruce, as he held up the lantern to inspect the unintentional work of Wandega's hands.

"Ef not, we're in a heap sight ov trouble, an' no end ov tribblyashun. What's ther best word, leetle 'un?"

He turned to the Indian girl as he spoke.

"How?" she answered not unmusically, and the boy repeated, making such gestures as he thought would enable her to understand his meaning.

Again she shook her head, this time slowly and thoughtfully, as failing to remember ever having heard of any.

"Ain't no use ter linger hyer, then. Lanterns won't burn more ner so long, an' ef this goes out ther' won't be much chance ter find one fur ourselves. S'pose we mosey on an' see whar we are at. Ef we're in a box we can't git out ov it'll be ther f'ust time fur me mother's darlin'."

Josie remained silent. Though Wandega was their guide as well as guard, she turned naturally to the boy for assistance.

While he was puzzled, she had nothing to say. When he suggested they begin to explore she was ready. After what they had gone through, it was not strange she had courage equal to almost any emergency, and faith to the utmost in Banty Bruce.

Wandega had nothing to say—which was not surprising. She allowed the boy to take the lead, and followed willingly, though as if she was somewhat dazed.

They found themselves in a small room, to which there was but one means of exit, and opening almost exactly opposite to the one by which they entered.

Along a narrow passage they hurried, turning several sharp corners, yet in the end going farther and farther into the mountain.

They came to another small room, from which led two passages, and of these they took the one to the right. All the signs were against finding another opening into the valley, but Banty was not willing to lose a chance.

He knew that if they were to receive assistance at the closed doorway it would be more apt to be later on than now, so that this was the time, if any, to spend in exploration.

Though they made all speed possible, their progress was not rapid, and perhaps the time seemed longer to them than it really was.

Wandega had followed without a protest, but at last she began to look behind her. Josie herself had doubts.

She put her hand on Banty's arm to check him.

"We find no hope, and are going too far. Would it not be best to turn before the lantern begins to fail? If it goes out we can never trace our way back."

"Fur why should we want ter?"

"Because that is our only hope. Bear Who Talks will understand what has happened when he comes to look for us, and find some way to get to us."

"Ef he gits in he'll find us hyer; ef he don't, bein' thar'd do us no good."

"But if the light goes out?"

"Better be a movin', and sooner be doin' it hyer than snoopin' round in ther dark thar. Keep yer sand up. We'll pull through."

He spoke bravely, and felt all the courage he showed, but at the same time he knew the oil in the lantern was well-nigh gone. The mystery to him had been that he had found any in it at all.

There was no answer to this, but the girls pressed a little closer to him as he started on again, looking keenly around at every step he took.

Again he halted; but this time because he saw something which seemed strange. Thus far their way had been excavated by nature; but now he came upon evidences of the work of man.

In the wall were the marks left by the tools of a miner, and a little beyond the opening to a drift.

It might be worth while to see whither it led, since it was as likely to be made to enter the cavern as by one who had already penetrated its recesses. He turned aside, and, stooping, followed the low passage for a few yards, suddenly halting at something almost at his feet.

He would have kept the girls back had it been possible, but their eyes were as quick as his.

There, looking more like a mummy than a simple corpse, with the rough clothing of a miner still around shrunk-en body and limbs, was a human body, and between the clawlike fingers was clasped a shining mass of thread gold.

An exclamation from Josie, a sputter from the lantern, and then the light went out.

They were alone in the horrible stillness of the black night, buried underground, their only companion a corpse.

Yet, at that moment, Josie thought of something else, forgetting her own danger.

"A light! Oh, a light!" she exclaimed. "I must see his face, and, oh! what if it should be father!"

"Easy, leetle gal. A light you shell have; but ther chances are ett ain't. Hyar's a match, an' look spy, fur we hain't too many ov 'em ter waste."

By the little flame Josie peered into the features to which the match was held, and drew a long sigh of relief when she made sure there was nothing familiar to be found there.

"No, it is a stranger. Poor fellow, he died just when he found the gold he must have been searching for."

"Most like heart disease," said Banty, thoughtfully. "P'raps ett war a skeer. How did he git hyer? That's what we're wantin' ter know. Mebbe thar war a cave-in, though, an' he couldn't foller ther way out. We'll hev ter leave him hyer fur ther present, an' you better ketch hold. We'll keep movin' while we kin, an' luck ett are I hed me eyes open while ther light lasted."

They backed out of the drift, and Banty again led the way.

With nerves all on edge, stumbling, striking the rock, now and then losing the touch of the wall by which they were guided, they crept on until at last they found their progress almost barred by loose gravel and stones, which seemed to form an embankment in front of them.

"Reckon we've found ther landslide ez shut him in. Let's see ef thar's a chance fur us ter wiggle our way out. Sure ez guns' we've got to ther other end. Stay hyer tell I git back, an' ef yer hear me callin' give a gentle 'hoop, but don't yer move tell I kim."

With this parting counsel, Banty crept forward and upward.

From time to time he spoke gently, but after a little his voice was heard no more.

He had found the route more practicable than he had hoped for, though in time it was barely large enough to worm his way through.

What encouraged him more than anything else was the strong current of air he met after a little. He was sure then he was on the right track.

A little later and he saw ahead of him a patch of moonlight, and knew there was a way out.

More than that, if he had passed through the crest of the mountain he had most likely got beyond danger. Without hesitation he pushed on, and finally crept out into the night air. He had reached a spot which had been laid bare by the miniature avalanche that had so nearly overwhelmed Captain Hard and his men, and the falling of which had no doubt reopened the passage.

Quite a little hole had been scooped out, and though the canyon was in front of him, on either side the rocks rose up, and it was not so certain their condition had been bettered. As well to starve in a cavern as on a mountain side from which there was no escape. He made a careful effort, and succeeded in scrambling up to a ledge at the top of the niche.

And as, on hands and knees, he crawled to level footing, a man sprung upon him, seizing him by neck and thigh, and crushing him to the ground.

At the same time this unexpected assailant gave a cry, as though he was doing his work at some little pain to himself, and having jowled the boy down he proceeded to shake him up.

"Thar ye be, cuss yer!" he exclaimed. "I swore ther chance ter get even'd kim, but I didn't think et'd git hyer so quick. Whar's ther gal?"

The man was the outlaw known as Paddy, and with both the boy's wrists in his sound hand he waited for an answer.

"Dunno ef I'm a chance er not, but ef I be I'm hyer, sure, ez you'll be apt ter find out ef yer don't let me be. Dunno nothin' 'bout no gal, but Banty are half a man, an' a heap sight better than lots ov hull ones."

"That don't go down. You got ther drop on us an' she skipped; this time I

got ther drop on you, an' she kin kim back ag'in. Whar is she?"

"Say, what's got through yer. We didn't go away tergether, did we? She slid out on her own hook, an' I run me own clam wagon. Ef you ain't seen her sence I laid eyes on her she's a lost gossin', sure."

Banty had been waiting for some show of relaxed vigilance on the part of his captor, expecting then to make the effort of his life.

Instead of that the effort came from the other side.

Paddy was no doubt as strong as two such boys, and with sudden activity he laid the lad over his knee, bound his wrists together and then his feet.

"I'll see whar you kim from," he growled. "'Spect yer tell ther truth about ther gal; but that's all ther wuss fur you. I kin afford ter git even; an' this are ez good a way ez any."

Dragging the boy after him, he slid down into the pocket.

The opening there was not hard to find, nor, as Paddy thought, to explore. It seemed simply a niche in the rocks, but he did not take into account the deceptive light, nor did he notice the opening above his head, which led farther back.

He listened; but all was silent.

"Yer needin' a rest, bad; an' thar ain't no better place goin' than right hyer. Sleep sound, an' ef ther boss happens ter want yer I'll come back an' let yer know. Good-night."

He crowded Banty into the back part of the alcove, and then began throwing up a wall of the huge stones which still lay convenient to his hand. Higher and higher rose the wall, until at last the final rock was forced into position shutting out both sight and sound.

Then, with his lips hard pressed together, and a wolfish gleam in his cruel, blackened eyes, Paddy turned and went away.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

The two pards did not open their arms at once to embrace Easy Andy. In fact, they looked at him with suspicion, and he could hardly have failed to note they had their hands convenient to their revolvers while Tom answered gruffly:

"I ain't jest so sure but what we're owin' suthin' ter that same cat—er would a bin ef we hedn't bin a watchin'."

"Ez how?"

"You war prowlin' 'round when ther beast mounted yer. An' ef I ain't mistook you war drawin' a bead, er tryin' ter do ett, on yourn trooly. Et might hev bin hoss flesh you war arter; but I war jest goin' ter make sure you'd be diserpinted when ther cat saved ther trouble. Ef we struck in, it war on jin'ral principles, an' not fur love er money."

Easy Andy laughed cheerfully.

"I knowed I hed neighbors, but I warn't so sure how they'd take a visit, so I come accordin'. I ain't on the hunt fur hosses now, er I'll edmit thar might be danger. But tell I knowed ef it war redskin er white, squar' man er rustler, I war moovin' accordin'. I made yer a offer thet war way up; what yer sayin' to ett?"

"Mebbe we're both on ther same lay."

"Ef so, it's big enough for all of us."

"That sounds good. Sit down and talk ett over. How long yer bin hyer?"

"Jest got in; but I bin hyer afore. I got a man in tow, but he's my meat. Hed ter bring him along ter git a outfit; but he won't hinder."

"Holy smoke! Like ez not he's ther man we's lookin' fur."

The two parties stared at each other suspiciously, but Easy Andy spoke up first.

"Five thousand looks like a heap big pile, but it's nothin' to what I got in my eye. I ain't takin' much stock in it nohow, an' ef yer wants him I'll turn him over ter you."

"That's just what, ef ett's ther man thet's lookin' fur a gal named Lorton."

"Yer right. That's him. I'll take ~~you~~ right to him, an' ef yer know anyth~~ing~~ you kin make yer barg'in."

"Pears like yer monst'us willin'?"

"So I be. When I make a barg'in I mean ett ter go; but ef I kin git shut ov him so much ther better. It would a took suthin' more than five thousand ter draw me hyer ag'in after I'd once got out alive. I ain't forcin' yer ter take a chance in with me, but some ov these days you'll be kickin' yerselves yer didn't jest jump when I made ther offer."

"See hyer. That man's nigh, is he?"

"Yer right; he is."

"What does he want of the girl?"

"I'll never tell. I didn't ax him."

"Take us to him and if we make a dicker we'll sheer ef you does your half ov ther work. Then, ef you kin show us a good thing you kin count me an' Ike in along with wer."

"It's a whack. I'd give a thousand anyhow ter git ther blamed tenderfoot offen my mind."

"Jest wait a minnit, pard. Ef we knowed more 'bout that find yer askin' us ter sheer we might know better how ter talk ter 'Curgus Jackson, ef that's ther name ov yer man."

"You got it down fine. An' ez fur my yarn—open yer ears now er they may be stritched too wide after awhile."

It was a strange story which Easy Andy had to tell, and yet, one not altogether unexpected.

Andy was a prospector, and together with his partner had made a way into these recesses, and finally finding such signs of gold they would not have sold out their chance for a million.

They had imagined themselves alone in the region, until they had found traces of a few Indians. Once, at some distance from their camp, they had come upon a squaw, who eluded them.

Then, they met an Indian girl, from whom they tried to gain some information, and when she would not speak they tried to frighten her with their threats.

It proved to be an unfortunate thing. A giant came to her aid, and before they were aware of his presence attacked them. With his bare fists he battered the life nearly out of them and then departed in one direction, while the Indian girl without a word went in another.

There was one singular thing about the man. He had with him a body-guard of animals—a huge mountain lion, and two bears, who crouched blinking and winking until the fight was over, and then trudged away at his heels.

They did not see the man again, but they heard from him and his four-footed allies, until their threatening attentions drove them out of the camp. Possibly they would not have gone had they not been in need of supplies.

When they did go they did not stand on ceremony, for it began to look as though the 'trange being and his stranger allies meant to make it hot for them. The two were separated, and Andy rather believed his partner had met with some evil fortune, as he had not turned up at the place of meeting as agreed.

Then, he met Lycurgus Jackson, and agreed to guide him to this neighborhood, and here they were.

The sooner ne could be got rid of the better it would suit Easy Andy.

As Andy reeled out his story Tom was running the whole thing over in his mind, and he mentally decided that one way or another it was to his profit to close with these overtures; and in case it was necessary he had no doubt about his being able to make his peace hereafter with Captain Hard, though if this thing turned out as it might he would never drop him altogether.

When Andy ceased his briefly outlined story his mind was made up.

"That's enough, pard. Count us with yer, an' ther sooner yer kin put us alongside ov him ther better. When we know what he wants we kin put him up ter a p'int er two that may be ther hub ov the hull wheel."

"All right. Ef ther painter ain't chawed him up I kin do it. He's waitin' over yander, now; an' I wouldn't wonder ef he war skeered nigh ter death."

He did his patron something of an injustice, for he was very much on the alert when the three men approached his camp a little later, and if they had come with hostile intentions they would have found him ready to put up a very good fight, with the cocked revolver he held in his hand.

Lycurgus, however, did not look like a hero. He was a fat, oily-looking man, great in girth, though of but medium stature, and spoke in a tone distinctively whiny.

It must have been something of great importance that could have brought him to this region, where he was peculiarly a stranger.

Tom was not at all abashed in such a presence, and opened matters without delay.

"You're ther party ez put out a han'-bill about a missin' gal?"

"Yes; and if you have any information about the poor girl you shall be well rewarded."

"I've heaps ov informashun, but I'm after all er none. Thar war a party had her fur ye, all right ernough, but she got away, an' now, pard an' me are on ther trail. We don't mind takin' yer in on ther ground floor, but we don't mean ter share ther coin."

"Oh, my friend, cheerfully will I give you all of the reward if I can once again meet the young girl, in whom I have the deepest interest, and who has been enticed away by a man claiming to be her uncle; but who, since reaching this country, I am only too much afraid is none other than the outlaw known as Captain Hard."

"Mebbe yer won't be sorry, then, ef I tell yer thet ther party she left with are lead. Leastwise, so they told me, an' I guess they wern't throwin' off on me."

"Dead! If I could be sure of that I could, heartless though it seems, rest easier."

"That seems a leetle odd, stranger. Them two stuck tergether like wax. Ther gal could a left him any time, but she reeked her life ter try ter save him. Ett was ther running away thet wore ther life outen him."

"She knew not who he was, or she would have shrunk from him in horror. At least, if I am not wrong. Even now—"

He ceased speaking suddenly, while his eyes opened to their widest extent, and his hand arose, to point at some object suddenly appearing at the rear of the three men with whom he was conversing.

Easy Andy and the rest wheeled suddenly; the same sight met their gaze. The intruders had come with the swiftness and silence of a shadow.

A strangely clad man, seemingly a giant in height and a Hercules in build, clutched an axe, which he held threateningly; on either side of him was an immense bear, while at his feet, with lips parted and white teeth showing in a noiseless snarl, was a great mountain lion.

"Lycurgus Jackson!" he roared, where is my daughter?"

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN HARD TO THE FRONT.

The beasts had seemed docile enough a second before, but at the sudden movement of the men the cougar emitted a warning growl, and the bears gathered themselves as though about to make a charge. It would take but a word to launch them. Jackson waved his hand for a truce, though it shivered and shook in the moonlight as he did so.

"Wilbur Lorton, if you are he, I would give thousands to know. If she is not with me it is no fault of mine. Wait, and she shall be found."

Lycurgus actually 'rose to a certain dignity as he spoke, and the three men beside him scarcely recognized his voice.

It seemed, however, to have a certain effect on the intruder, who lowered his axe.

"It may be true, it may be true; but I dreamed that you had given her to Edgar Bastion, and sent them out to slay me. Why should my child hate me? I have done her no harm?"

"Edgar Bastion? I never even suspected. Wait, wait! Have patience. She does not hate you. I have never even told. She was coming to you. She is even somewhere near. She will be found. She must be found. These men know something of her, and we were even now discussing how to come upon her trail."

"How? What trail? My poor brain!"

The strange being put his hand up to his head as though he would steady his thoughts. The axe had already dropped from his grasp. There were three men there who would have flung themselves upon him had it not been for his body guard.

"From the time you confided your daughter and your fortune to me, shortly after receiving your injury, I have raised Josie in ignorance of the possibility of your being alive. I firmly believed that your mind had entirely given way, and you had committed suicide. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes. Just now I do. Go on."

"I treated her as my own; her fortune is intact. But some one came to her and told her that her father still lived, and that he was deputed to lead her to him. How he convinced her I know not."

"And of her mother?"

"I told her never a word that would reveal the secret."

"What are you—what are you doing here?"

"I followed her this far."

"This far—here?"

"Yes."

"And Trebizond never knew."

The man seemed to change in the twinkling of an eye. If they could have looked into his face they would have believed he was a different individual altogether. There was an awful ring in his voice, as though madness had come back on the wings of a thousand fiends. He wheeled, and without a backward look at his four-footed attendants, who followed closely on his heels, bounded away.

Tom threw up his revolver. There was an instinct on him to shoot, and it was a narrow escape. Lycurgus knocked aside the muzzle just in time.

"Another five thousand if we can save him from himself."

"An' how much ef we tries an' slips up?" shrewdly thrust at him the mountain rough.

"A thousand a piece. Will you follow me?"

"Tell yer gold melts," was the ready answer.

"Then come on. We must not allow him out of our sight till we have located his den."

"Jest a weenty bit ov satisfaction f'ust. We's strangers an' you ain't none too well acquainted. Afore this game opens, wouldn't ett be well ter put up a leetle ante?"

"I understand. Of course, I carry no such sums around with me, but, as you know so much, you must have heard that my check would go for a million. Andrew can tell you something about that."

"Kay-reck. I'll take his chips fur cold cash—when I hev to."

"Here is a hundred for each, which will at least show you I am in earnest. If you delay too long I withdraw my offer."

"Holy Moses! don't do that, an' we're yourn tell ther cows' tails drap off. We're riddy ter start right now."

Ike had been saying nothing, but his respect for the tenderfoot had been rapidly rising, and he broke in earnestly. In fact, he led the way, the rest deserting the camp without hesitation.

Trebizond had disappeared; but from the direction in which he had been moving, and what Easy Andy had to say, it was not hard to understand what was his most probable destination. Whether they could overtake him did not for the moment enter their heads.

By and by the gloom grew deeper, and they plunged into a gulch, the bed of which sloped upward, and, though Lycurgus Jackson began to breathe hard, there was no present thought of stopping. They tried to tread lightly, but four men can hardly stumble in darkness over rough and strange ground without making their presence heard.

Suddenly, a sharp, stern voice near them called out:

"You there, halt! One of you come forward with hands up and explain who you are."

Tom and his pard were side by side. Ike leaned over.

"Ett's ther Capt'n, by Moses. What's ther best hold?"

"I'll run ther chances an' do ther talkin' ef yer all agreed," answered Tom, stepping briskly forward, his hands well over his head.

"Frien's she be!" he added in a still louder tone.

"This way, then; and the rest of you stay as you are."

In obedience to the order Tom moved on; and, though the rest of the men were concealed so cleverly he did not note them as he passed, he soon came face to face with Captain Hard.

"Who are those men out there, and how do you come to be on this trail?"

"Easy Andy and 'Curgus Jackson, they call theirselves; an' they be on ther trail ov ther gal. Bein' ez they hed the'r noses p'inted in this d'reckshun, we thort we'd better kim along, an' steer 'em whar they'd do ther most good. Ther's coin in them two, ter say nothin' ov what they knows 'bout that bonanzer, which are all thar ez reported."

"Lycurgus Jackson! Ah! I shall be

glad to see him. You can tell them it is all right, and they can come in."

"Jest a minnit, f'ust. We war follerin' a queer, loonytick sorter a cuss, what, from all I heard, are ther father ov ther gal. He passed by hyer lately—did yer see him?"

"What! And the girl with him?"

"Not that we seen. Looked like he hedn't got glimps of her. Ef he did he never knowed her. But he knowed 'Curg. Jackson."

"That will do. You have done a big thing without knowing it, and will receive pay accordingly. Call them in. I will attend to the matter now."

The captain spoke in self-contained tones, and it was hard to tell his meaning. As Tom had made rather a study of him at odd times, he rather thought there was evil in the wind for some one, though no sign of that belief was in the call that he raised.

A moment later the three men came blundering forward.

"Which is Mr. Jackson?" asked the captain, coolly.

"That is my name."

"Ah, I am glad to hear it. Sorry for this delay, but we will try to make it up for you. There is no time to waste, and explanations will be in order later on. I suppose you have not found the girl as yet."

"No, no! But we will. Hurry. Do not detain us. Were it not that he can turn neither to the right nor the left I would give up hope."

Jackson seemed not to notice the dark forms that closed up, and moved on without a suspicion that he had fallen in with one whom he would have been most anxious to avoid had he only known.

Perhaps he was even thankful at that moment for outside help. Between them they could sweep over the ground so thoroughly there would be no danger of passing their game in the dark.

In spite of the little rest he had taken Lycurgus Jackson was more exhausted than he knew; and soon began to lag.

At that, Tom and one of the stragglers dropped back to his side. They did not intend him to fall out without company. After that, the rest went on faster than ever, and were soon beyond sight and hearing.

"Did you tell them the man must on no account be hurt?" Jackson gasped, as he hung on to the arm of Bogan for needed support.

"In course; but thar war'n't no need. That man wouldn't hurt a fly."

But, as he spoke, a shot roared out in the darkness ahead, followed by other shots, and shouts, and the screams of a panther. Then, the noise died away.

Once more Jackson hurried on; and before long came upon the party, which was waiting for him. In the gloom it seemed like a little army; and they were looking down into a valley where all was black and silent.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ROCKS ARE ROLLED AWAY.

The rescue of the horses from the blind canyon in which they had been imprisoned had taken time and labor; but after Captain Hard and his men got fairly at it there was never a doubt but what it would be accomplished.

The great thing to be done was to make sure that if there were any falling rocks they should go to the other side.

This was what had occupied the time of Captain Hard. When the labor was done Paddy and a comrade were left to guard the spot, and, if possible, to capt-

ure "Dark Mind," should he return. The rest went away to seek a more practicable route to the valley they knew lay beyond. Thus it happened they came into contact with Lycurgus Jackson; and it also explained the appearance of Paddy on the spot when Banty Bruce made his exit from the cavern in which he and the girls had taken refuge, though of course, if was hours after Captain Hard had left the spot.

Paddy felt quite satisfied with the work he had done, and imagined that his prisoner would do him more good thus disposed of than in any other way he could think of. He went back to his pard; and so quietly had he done his work that not a sound of it had reached the ears of the man who was dozing a few hundred yards away.

"Say, Corker, ett's 'bout your turn now. Everything seems ter be runnin' on wheels, but keep yer ears open an' fingers riddy. Ef yer see ary thing up yander, shoot at ther drop ov ther hat. Yer can't go wrong."

Corker sprung up without demur, while Paddy sank down. He had no objections to a little rest, and he wanted to think things over. Before he knew it he was asleep.

A good while after, as it seemed, he was awakened by the report of a gun.

He leaped upward—and fell back. Something jowled him down, and he felt Corker across him. Staring up he saw a shaggy monster settling down on them both.

He recognized the head and shoulders of an immense bear.

He had heard nothing of Trebizond the tamer and his accomplished subjects, but he knew his best game was for the present to lie still, though he was not sure the weight of monster and man would not crush the life out of him.

Perhaps the brute would go away before that, if only Corker would do the same.

The brute was not ragingly savage, and simply held them to the spot.

Meantime, another bear was sauntering along the edge of the canyon, sniffing now and then. When he came to a sort of pocket scooped out of the rock he stopped, examined it sagely, and then slid down a few yards until he stood before a well and lately built patch of wall.

Here he used his nose more than ever, giving a few anxious whiffs.

The result appeared to satisfy him, for he attacked the wall without delay. Great rocks he tossed aside as though they were pebbles. Stones that Paddy strained at to lift went rolling down into the canyon below as though they were pebbles.

Having demolished the wall he thrust his head into the alcove, and grunted cordially.

"Hello, Si'nide," answered a cheerful voice from within.

"It's Banty Billy, sure enough. What's the good word?"

Cyanide drew back as though surprised; but the snapping of a finger arrested him, and Wandega, darting out, threw her arms around his neck, at which he surrendered altogether.

"Yer jest in time, Si'nide. They hed a dickens ov a time gittin' to me, an' ther wonder war they warn't lost altogether. But, what we goin' ter do now?"

Perhaps Cyanide understood him. At any rate, he turned his muzzle down the gorge, and shambled away. The three came trailing after, for last of all, Josie had made her way out of the alcove and joined her friends.

"Holy Caesars, thar's another ov 'em!"

Banty had none too much confidence in the animals, but had heard all that Josie had to tell about them; and until they could get out of this pickle their company could not well be avoided. He strode up to the spot, and discovered Paddy and his companion in a well-nigh senseless condition.

Wandega glided up and touched Hyperchlorate, who growled but shambled back, while Banty Billy stooped down and peered into the faces of the men.

After that he did not hesitate, but bound the two firmly while he had the chance, appropriating their weapons without a shade of hesitation.

"Reckon they ain't hyer all by the'r lonesome selves; but we can't take 'em along, an' I reely don't like ter kill 'em. When ther gang comes along they'll set 'em loose, but mebbe they'll hev hed a lesson. We'll draw off a leetle afore we talks 'bout which way ter turn. Pity fur 'em thet they ain't hurt a leetle wuss. Might save their lives. Ef I find 'em on my trail ag'in ther'll be killin' done."

Wandega led the way, and seemed to know it well enough, cautiously though she advanced. They did not even stop to rest, though daylight was coming in the east.

Turning this way and that, a nook was finally reached, where the Indian girl gave them a signal to halt. There was a spring bubbling out from under a rock, and over her shoulder she carried a small haversack. Breakfast, such as it was, came not amiss, nor the couple of hours' slumber which followed. Without them Josie would have been a perfect wreck. After that the strange procession started again, proceeding more cautiously than ever. The distance was not so great in a direct line; they moved as though every step was toward an ambushade.

Banty would have been for simple retreat, but when Wandega shook her head Josie refused to turn, and the boy trudged along without a word further.

Their path led them over the crown of the mountain, and they did not halt when the locked-in valley lay before them.

Then, Wandega suddenly crouched lower, and the rest halted as their feet dropped to the rock. Not far below them their eyes rested on a singular sight.

The valley had received visitors since leaving it.

There was the bear-tamer, in the first place. He was going straight to where the entrance to the passage had been. He seemed unconscious of observation, yet not far away half a dozen men were watching him, and in the first rank stood Captain Hard.

To the rear, again, guarded by Tom Bogan, was a prisoner, at sight of whom Josie had hard work to repress a cry. It was Lycurgus Jackson, looking oilier and more unconcerned than ever. He seemed to be able to rise to almost any occasion, and when, in the early morning, he had found himself in the hands of Hard, he retained an unruffled front, and gave few answers to subsequent questions.

The bear-tamer halted at the spot where the opening once was, and looked thoughtfully at the rock which closed its mouth. He stooped down and peered under it, never noticing that Captain Hard and his men were drawing nearer. He caught up a log that lay near, and began to work with the strength of a giant.

Finally, he gave a great backward

leap, and at that moment Hard was on him.

For a few seconds there was a flurry, like to that of a stricken whale when tangled among the boats. With a wild yell the bear-tamer struck out with his only weapon, leveling two outlaws, while with one shake of his gigantic shoulders he flung the captain to the ground.

Hard was down, but not conquered. Rising on one elbow he whipped out a revolver and threw it up to bear, just as Trebizond dropped.

It was the last sight the captain saw on earth—and a strange one. The work of the bear-tamer had loosened the chucks, and all at once, like a thing of life, the rock came bursting out from the passage.

Trebizond, the unwieldy lever still in his hand, was almost in its path. The rock struck the log, the log struck his head and crushed him down. Then, the boulder, swerving a trifle around the end of the lever, changed its course slightly, and darted at the captain. Before he knew it, death and the rock were on him. Broken, flattened, crushed, dead, he lay there, scarcely recognizable, while the rock thundered on down the slope.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF THE TURN.

The sudden death of Captain Hard demoralized his men. They knew not what to do next, and stared from one to the other of the two senseless men, wondering if both were dead. It needed but little to produce a panic, and something more than that little came.

With a shrill scream, a mountain lion, which had lain crouched among the rocks above the spot, bounded down to the side of the tamer, and then crouched again, as if for another spring. At the same time Cyanide and his companion came lumbering down in a headlong charge, while they heard Banty Billy's challenge:

"Say, you fellers down thar, you begin ter git, er I'll begin ter shoot."

They "got" accordingly—all save Tom Bogan, who coolly whispered into Lycurgus Jackson's ear:

"Didn't I told yer ter take ett easy, an' I'd bring yer through all right? Me an' Andy knows a thing er two, an' we never barks up ther right tree at ther wrong time."

"I do not know whether to trust you yet, for you seem to be always on the strongest side, without caring which it is. Still, if things turn out as I think and we return in safety, you shall have your reward. Now, can I go to him?"

"Ef yer wants ter reesk ther hull menadjery, ter say nothin' ov t'other chance ov Hard kimin' ter life. Thar's nothin' else ter hinder."

Jackson went forward carefully. By the time he had reached the bear-tamer Wandega was bending over him, while Josie was standing near, a troubled look on her face. Captain Hard, a few paces farther on, lay lifeless, but no one noticed him. All eyes were on the tamer, who groaned now, and moved heavily.

When he opened his eyes there was a look about them and in them much different from that which had been there before they were closed.

He started up, somewhat uncertain, to be sure, and when he saw the face of Lycurgus he gave an evident start.

"Lycurgus—you here? Where am I? What does this all mean?"

"Thank heaven, you are in your right mind at last, and pray heaven you may stay so."

The incautious speech worked no harm.

"Ah, I have been wandering, have I? That blow on the head—it will be all right now. And Ella—how does it come that she is here? Great heavens! I remember now. Ella is dead! Who, then, is that?"

He pointed at Josie, who was listening in horrified wonder.

"That, Wilbur, is your daughter."

"Then"—he turned his head around to survey the landscape, and he looked at the unfamiliar faces—"then I have been mad for—for—at least a dozen years."

"Not mad, but bewildered. We thought you dead. You made no sign. Had it not been for your daughter, you might have remained forever dead to us. She came to find you."

"How did she find the way?"

"Some one claiming to be her uncle met her, told her some strange stories, and led her away. I believe it was none other than Edgar Bastion."

"My half brother?"

"Yes."

"Wait. I dreamed that Edgar Bastion was dead, and that I buried him. Could that be true?"

"Perhaps it is. But better say no more for a time. Let us take you to a place where you can rest. By-and-by there will be more to say."

"I am stronger than you think. That blow on the side of the head has only set my wits to working. I must know more. Why did Bastion seek me?"

The girl answered:

"Because he had done you great wrong, but was repentant. He would have willingly forfeited his life to the law, as was its due, if he had not wished first of all to beg pardon from you. He had the certificate of mother's first marriage, and entrusted it to me; but I—I lost it. That makes no difference. She was never sinning, but may have been sinned against, and if you ever thought differently it was because that old hurt had driven you wild."

"Yes, yes! I never really doubted her! Thank heaven, I am now in my right mind! What has happened since seems but a dream—yet I can remember it all, even to Cyanide and Hypochlorate, my own especial pets. And yonder is Wandega, the waif. Accept her as your sister, for she has been for years my adopted daughter."

"But where is Bear Who Talks?"

"I am Bear Who Talks, unless my memory strangely belies me. And Cinnamon Moll, and other characters with which, at one time or another, I have peopled this glen."

"And the loss of Uncle Bastion's message—you are sure it will work no harm?"

For a girl who had just found her father, Josie was strangely cool, but then he had been lost for over a dozen years, and for the most of that time she had thought him dead. It would take time for her to be enthusiastic over a ghost. And, to tell the truth, she was still a little afraid of him.

"It was not lost," he responded, with a wan smile. "I went back that night and found it before I changed my garb to that of Talk Bear. Ever since I have carried it, though not understanding what it meant to me. Give me your hand; and you, too, Jackson. I have made some strange discoveries in this neighborhood, if my dream is real all through. Let me rest now, for you were right, and I am weaker than I thought, but I will be altogether right when I wake again."

Wilbur Lorton made no mistake about his future. The chance blow seemed to

have undone the work of one received in the same spot years before. When he awoke he was still sane as the sanest, save for the dreamy shadowiness of the years he had passed in the garb of Trebizond the bear-tamer and Talk Bear.

It had been a bad day for Captain Hard when he attempted to combine bonanza hunting with outlawry. He imagined he was on the trail of uncounted gold, and so he was, but he died just in sight of port. He believed that if he could find this mountain pocket, and the strange being legends of whom he had heard, it would be a better way to wealth than turning to place Josie in the hands of her pursuing uncle. Perhaps it was; yet death stopped him, and his followers melted away at that first stern check.

The bonanza gave something like wealth to Banty Billy and the little party. Of them all, Bruce was the only one who had regrets, mourning for the disappearance of Dandy, the burro.

When Wilbur Lorton changed his garb, Josie really knew that he was her father, and after that felt neither shyness nor fear; but her greatest surprise was when she discovered that Wandega, as she still called her, had a tongue, and when the hermit's restriction had been removed could use it as well as anyone.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers.

22 William Street, New York.